COWBOY-LIFE ROMANCES

Lariat

JULY

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STORY MAGAZINE

SEÑOR SIDEWINDER
by WALT COBURN

THE DEVIL'S POSSE
by 'GENE CUNNINGHAM

MIDNIGHT RIDERS OF MORONGO RIM

THE MASKED RAIDERS LEARNED TO REGRET THE DAY THEY DRAGGED QUIET JIM BURDETT INTO THEIR GOLD-SPAWNED FEUD!

A ROARING SIX-GUN NOVEL
by ROLLIN BROWN

"The Romance of the West —Written with Action"

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Lariat STORY MAGAZINE

T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager

MALCOLM REISS, Editor

A COMPLETE WESTERN NOVEL

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A Novel of Outlaw Trails

MIDNIGHT RIDERS OF MORONGO RIM

By ROLLIN BROWN

Morongo Rim was wild—a three-ring circus of highline hell—poison for the law-breed! But young, scowling Deputy Jim Burdett didn't know a hopeless fight when he saw one.

BEYOND the willows that edged the shallow creek lay the town with the smokes of its morning fires drifting lazily in thin stringers against the blue, bright sky above. Hitch rails and uneven strips of plank walk fronted the weathered square board fronts of buildings that faced each other across a space of hub-deep ruts

and hardened winter mire that was turning into dust. This was Blakenhorn and with the sight of it there before him, Jim Burdett felt like giving his horse the spurs and entering town with a whoop and clatter of hoofs. But the buckskin Cully Mills rode at his side had lamed a leg among the rocks that morning, and Cully refused to push the animal beyond a walk.

"Sure looks good after a winter holed up in the hills. Sure does," Jim said. "First, I'm startin' at the Palace with a drink. Then there's a faro dealer that took me down to tobacco money last fall. I'm goin' to even things up with him."

"First," said Cully Mills, "I got to tend to this hoss's leg."

So they passed the Palace where a paunchy barkeep was sweeping out the litter of last night's festivities and sprinkling fresh sawdust on the floor; passed the Alhambra and Faro Ned's where the dealer Jim remembered lounged in the doorway with a green eye-shade tilted over his brows, waiting for the day's business to begin. They rode on past the bank on the main corner and turned into the Haslop Stable and feedyards at the far end of the street.

Jim was for letting the hostler tend to the horse, but with the saddle off, Cully insisted on following the buckskin into the corral and rubbing down the leg himself. Cully was like that. All winter long, holed up at that line shack on the Sentry divide for days on end while one blizzard followed another, Cully had been like that. Stubborn. Dogged about the way he did anything. They had quarreled bitterly; each cooked his food in turn on the small pot-bellied stove with that dismal ten-foot cabin room divided by an imaginary line between them. On one side Jim Burdett lived and slept; on the other side Cully Mills did the same, elaborately ignoring each other. For days neither spoke.

But with the first warm chinook, with lengthening hours spent in the saddle from first thin dawn till long after dark, chilled to the bone most of the time, plowing their horses through the old drifts, slipping on the soggy south slopes, risking neck and limbs a dozen times every day to move weak, half-starved cattle to open grass, this had changed. There was that afternoon when his mount fell in a gully bottom and pinned Jim's leg with a fresh storm screaming through the timber, and Cully had somehow tracked him out hours after dark with the smoky cabin lantern, before the leg had frozen. That other day when Cully's rope had pulled him heels first out of a bog, and the time Cully's horse plunged through the ice on Rock Creek and it was Jim's turn.

"Aw, come on, Cully," Jim urged. "Time's wastin'."

Cully rubbed the buckskin's leg. "You never was in such an all-fired hurry to get up in the black of mornin' in that line shack last winter, I remember," Cully said. "This buckskin's been a mighty good hoss to me. Might be it's a strained tendon."

"What you need, my friend," said a voice from the other side of the corral fence, "is a bottle of Chippewa Natural Root and Herb Liniment. Equally good for either man or beast. A pure and wonderful compound, gentlemen, the secret of which has been handed down through generations of that tribe whose name it bears and has only come into my possession after years of unrelenting effort and personal sacrifice. Across the country I have sold this marvelous remedy, as thousands of satisfied purchasers will testify, for one price and one price only: $2.00, the full sixteen-ounce bottle. But seeing your need, my friend, I am tempted—nay, I am going to offer you, give you that full sixteen-ounce bottle for half its price. For just one dollar. Nancy,"—the man at the corral fence turned and called behind him—"bring one from the wagon."

THE wagon, standing in a vacant lot behind the corral, had red wheels and Chippewa Natural Root & Herb Liniment on the sideboards in big gilt letters. A girl of about sixteen with big eyes and taffy-colored hair in long braids left a dishpan that was balanced on a box beside the smoking embers of a fire and climbed into the back of the wagon, returning with a bottle of dark-colored liquid which she handed to the man. Cully with five months wages in his inside pocket worked with the safety-pin fastening and got a dollar out.

"Follow directions carefully," the man

on the other side of the corral bars said. "And if this doesn't prove to be the best liniment of its kind you've ever used your money will be cheerfully refunded."

"Mud an' crick water," Jim Burdett said, as Cully carefully read the directions on the bottle.

Five horsemen in a compact group came trotting in along the street. Hat brims were pulled low against the morning sun, and Jim noticed their riding gear was old and serviceable. The horses they rode were big, rangy animals with power and stamina in their stride and build. He noticed one in particular, a tall sorrel with two white-stockinged feet, and the butt of a carbine that protruded from boot under the rider's knee. But nothing more than that. The riders passed at their easy jog.

"See that!" Jim said. "Town's already fillin' up, and we ain't even had a drink. I got business with that faro dealer."

"It'll wait," Cully said, undisturbed. He finished rubbing the buckskin's leg, applying the liniment. "You know what I promised myself last winter, Jim. I'm stickin' to it now. First-off, before I lift one drink or risk two-bits on a card, I'm takin' half this pay-money in my pocket into the Drovers Bank up-street and layin' it down for safe-keepin'. I ain't aimin' to wake up tomorrow without a penny to my name. Time an' again last winter you swore you'd do the same."

"After I see that faro dealer. It takes money to buck a game."

"Me, I ain't forgettin' so easy. I'm doin' it now," Cully said.

Cully was like that. There was no changing him, once he'd set his mind on a thing.

The five horses that had passed along the street now stood at a rack in front of the Drovers Bank on the main corner. Again Jim noticed the sorrel with the two white-stockinged feet. Reins were dropped over the hitch rail, none tied; and the man who had ridden the sorrel stood close beside the horse, apparently idly examining the carbine which he had pulled from saddleboot. As they came even with him along the plank walk in front of the bank, the man turned and now a bandana mask covered his face up to the eyes. Above it his eyes were as colorless-cold as stone. The muzzle of the carbine dropped. Cully gasped, and Jim's mouth fell wide open.

"Step over there against the wall of the bank," the man said in a low, harsh voice. The horses sheltered him from direct view along the street. "Don't lift your hands. But keep 'em in sight!"

A gun exploded suddenly within the bank with a dull, half-muffled roar. Three of the riders emerged together from the bank doorway. One, a redhead with a crooked knife scar across his brow, carried a gunnysack that swung heavily at his side. As he tossed the sack to the man beside the sorrel his mask partially slipped, and Jim had that much of a glance at the redhead's lean, narrow face. The fourth rider came out backward from the bank doorway, a trickle of gunsmoke drifting up from the weapon he held.

This all happened at once. A wagon pulling along street halted thirty or forty yards away. Farther off, somewhere, men began to shout. At Jim Burdett's side, Cully made an instinctive movement, reaching up to clutch that roll of money in his inside pocket. It might have looked like he was reaching for a weapon in shoulder holster under his brush-jumper. The redhead had gone past. Jim never knew which of the other three it was who shot. All were opening fire now along the street.

In saddle, the man with the gunnysack spurred the sorrel away from the rack. Systematically the four behind him shelled the street while they mounted and got away. None of those big, leggy, hard-muscled horses was gunshy. It was ten seconds before Jim Burdett knew that Cully had been hit. Cully's legs gave way and he crumpled down on the walk planks in front of the bank, one hand still clutching that roll of money in his shirt pocket. By now there was only a pounding drum of hoofs, traveling back past the Haslop corral out of town. Anyhow Jim had no gun on him.

In a vague way he realized that a crowd had collected about him and Cully, there on the walk in front of the bank. One part of his brain understood and answered the questions put to him. But what Jim was thinking about was that winter on the Sentry divide: the mean way he'd acted; the way he'd whistled all day long sometimes on his side of the shack, just

because it bothered Cully. And it was Cully who had saved his leg, if not his life, that night of the late spring blizzard. Things like that.

"Did you see the hold-up? Pa says they got nearly six thousand dollars. It was some of the Hackett gang, they think."

Jim was standing in the corral downstreet now, saddling his horse, although he didn't know how he got there, and this was the girl with the big eyes and long taffy-colored braids looking through the bars and talking excitedly.

"Where's your friend?" she asked. "The one that bought the liniment for his horse."

"He's dead," Jim said.

Her eyes grew bigger and her mouth closed tight. There were a number of riders and townsmen in the corral, saddling horses. Jim opened the warbag he'd brought into town on the back of his saddle and took out an old Colt's .44 in its leather holster wrapped around with the cartridge belt. He swung the gun at his hip and buckled the belt. The gun was not much good—just an old one he'd traded for with some whang leather and a braided bridle. Once he'd had to shoot a steer with it, and he'd practiced a time or two at a target.

"Would—could you drink a cup of coffee before you leave?" the girl asked. "It might be a long ride." She had poured the cup full from a battered pot on the embers of the fire beside the red-wheeled wagon, and was holding it through the corral bars to him.

Jim drank it without looking at her. He said gruffly, "Thank you, kid."

He climbed into saddle then and followed the riders leaving the corral. No one had asked him to join this posse, but no one questioned his right to go.

II

THAT had all been four years ago. A lot of water had run under the bridge since then, so the saying goes. Daly Hackett, well-known and one-time leader of the gang, had met his end some eighteen months later in a mail car robbery up around Mormon Pass. At the same time Campo Pierce, another member of the Hackett crowd who was badly wanted back in Texas, had been wounded and captured. Clay, youngest of the three Hackett brothers, was knifed in a saloon brawl at Socorro about a year after that. This left Lew Hackett, the middle brother, and the redhead named Karg.

Jim Burdett kept track of these things,

The posse that had left the Haslop corral that morning so long ago hadn't come within more than distant sight of the five men who had held up the bank at Blankenhorn and shot down Cully Mills on the plank-board walk. Over among the Sentry Hills, next day, the trail had been lost among the roughs. The posse scouted the ridges and divide for another three days, but found nothing, and so returned to town, weary and hungry. But Jim Burdett did not ride back with it; nobody missed him much. There was grub in that line shack where he had wintered with Cully, and with a pack on his saddle and his old Colt's gun Jim worked north from there.

Three, four months had passed before the town saw him again. Then one day on the street old Buck Canute, who had been the sheriff in charge of the posse and hated to quit when he did, noticed a lank, shambling figure whose bootheels were worn down to stubs and thought he recognized something familiar about this down-and-out cowboy. So he stopped him.

"Say, ain't you—I forget your name—but didn't you ride with that posse after the Hackett gang? Over in the Sentry Hills that time."

"That's right," Jim said.

"What happened to you after that?" Old Buck was curious.

"Well, for a while I trailed around the hills," Jim said. "About a week later I found old sign over on Rock Crick. I tracked it north from there."

"That's been three-four months ago."

Jim nodded. "Sign petered out; it never amounted to nothin' much. But I kept on workin' north, just on a chance. Finally up in the Squaw River country my horse give out. I had to buy another and run out of money. Couldn't find a job up there."

"So it was like that!"

"Like that," Jim said.

Old Buck Canute thought this over,

standing in the hot sunlight of the street. "I got a hunch," he said finally. "Mind you, it's just a hunch. But might be I could use a man like you. This-hyar's a big country, brush and mountain wall and grassland. More cattle, more stockmen keep comin' in all the time. Sheep over to the east, along the Morongo Rim. Minin' interests are makin' a showin', too. Ever do any deputy work?"

"Give me a try at it," Jim said.

Something had changed in him those past few months; before that he had been just a rider, drifting around from job to job, spending his money in one big fling whenever he hit town. But he saw things differently now. He was twenty-two. There was another kind of a job coming up in this country, long and bitter and hard; and Jim Burdett knew on which side of the fence he was bound to stand.

In the four years that had passed since that time a railroad spur had reached Blakenhorn and cattle crowded the loading pens. Buyers, drummers, merchants, mill and mining men, railroad workers, stockmen and cowhands thronged the walks and the hotels. Trouble flared between cow owners and the sheep men on the Morongo Rim. Over beyond the Sentry divide, at the far end of Elton County, a prospector named Ben McClendon dug up a pack-burro load of wire-gold quartz that assayed fifteen hundred dollars to the ton. He named the strike Paystreak.

The boom was on in earnest then. So was the cow-sheep war on the Morongo Rim. Old Buck Canute rode from his first into his second term of office as sheriff of Elton County on the fall elections, the third year, with two hired deputies, besides Jim Burdett, on the payroll. Jim spent that fall and winter and the next spring on the Morongo Rim, while over beyond the Sentry Hills the strike camp of Paystreak doubled its population every week. Freight and stages now were going in across the divide where, till a few short months ago, there had been only occasional scattered line shacks and the fugitive outlaw trails beyond.

Blakenhorn stood in the middle, with the wild Morongo Rim and all its conflict to the east. Off on the other hand, with the Sentry Hills raising their wall between, was Paystreak. It was a three-ring circus; Elton County needed three sheriffs, three hard-riding deputy crews. That was the trouble—or part of it. That was why Old Buck Canute had called Jim Burdett in from the Morongo Rim, and Jim had ridden steadily for ten hours to reach town in the early morning and stable his horse at the old Haslop yards which had been moved to a back street that had been sagebrush four years ago, to make way for new buildings along the main street.

"GIVES his name as Joe Carson. Age about thirty; weight one-sixty-five. Height five-foot ten. Complexion sandy; hair sorrel red. Crooked scar across the left eyebrow," old Buck Canute read. He fingered the piece of paper in his big hand, glancing up. He asked, "Mean anything to you, Jim?"

It meant a lot. Plain as though it had only happened yesterday, Jim Burdett could see the street in front of the old Drovers Bank and what had taken place there four years ago. He remembered the redhead's scar and the way the man's mask had slipped as he tossed the money sack, briefly exposing a lean, narrow face. It tightened the muscles in Jim Burdett's throat.

He said, "What's the rest of it?"

"Day before yesterday Clint Neill picked up a hot trail into the Sink Holes," old Buck Canute said. "There was shootin' at the other end of it. Neill came back into Paystreak with this Joe Carson in a litter he'd made out of a couple poles and a blanket swung between their hosses, Carson lyin' on it with his leg broke from a bullet in the fight they'd had. Neill locked him up in the jail at Paystreak, got a doctor, and then sent this description out to me on the late stage. Neill evidently figured Joe Carson had another name and record. He figured I might be able to check upon it from the description. He wasn't aimin' to move Carson farther with a broken leg."

"That was the day before yesterday, you said?"

"Uh-huh. Next mornin's stage brought me Clint Neill's resignation as deputy over in that end of the county," Buck

Canute said in the same dry, toneless voice. "Effective immediately, accompanied by his badge. Since then I've heard he was seen early yesterday, crossin' the Sentry Hills at Summit. Neill's packed his baggage in his saddlebags and left. Walked out, quit. I'd already sent a man after you in the Morongo Rim.

"It's bad. It's plenty tough in there, Jim," old Buck Canute continued. "Where Ben McClendon located his first block of claims, less than a year ago, there's now ten square miles of the surroundin' country staked solid. Paystreak's sprung up from this like a mushroom with its roots in the gold-bearin' quartz underfoot. Two stages, runnin' both ways every day, don't half handle the boomer trade. Freight outfits, on the road eighteen hours a day, are doin' the best they can, haulin' loads a month behind schedule. That ain't the worst of it.

"Last week two loads, both carryin' machinery for McClendon, went over the grade. One snapped a brake-bar that had been sawed half-through and run wild on the down-slope; crippled some mules, broke away from the team and plunged off into a canyon. The driver of the other load was slugged. He woke up a while later, to find his wagon burnin' in the brush below and his eight-mule team drove off and gone. There ain't been a ten-day stretch since last spring but what some stage on the road has been robbed. It's always a stage with a money shipment aboard that gets stopped. That means there's a leak on the inside somewhere."

"How d'you figure this about Clint Neill?" Burdett asked. "I rode with him a time or two when trouble first started on the Morongo Rim."

"So far as I know, Neill always played it straight," Sheriff Canute said. "He's faced a lot of trouble in there. But I don't know why he'd quit and walk out like that. However, it's considered, the outlaw crowd is bound to figure it run Neill out. That ain't goin' to help matters any.

"Just how does it happen, four times out of five, that it's only a stage with a money load that gets hit?" old Buck went on belligerently. "Where is that leak? It's got so bad the merchants and saloon men are sneakin' their money out, runnin' it across the trails by a fast horseman after dark. Sometimes it gets through, sometimes not. Men like McClendon, Matt Sutton, Enders and others in Paystreak are doin' all they can. But with the richest claim in the gulch opened up and ready to produce Ben McClendon ain't yet got the machinery he needs on the ground to go ahead. Those two freight loads wrecked over the grade last week will set him back another month. Why? There's nothin' for the road agents in a job like that. A grudge don't explain it."

"The redhead's still in jail in Paystreak?" Jim Burdett asked.

"Neill left him there. I sent my orders in to hold him, and the man's got a broken leg," Canute said. He shook his big grizzled head. "I'm thinkin' the same thing you are, Jim. Neill's description of Joe Carson would just about fit Red Karg from what is known of him. Karg used to run with the Hacketts, before the gang was split up in that mail car robbery at Mormon Pass. That job accounted for Daly and Campo Pierce. Clay Hackett got his later, down in Socorro. But so far as is known Lew Hackett is still alive and at large. So is Karg—unless this man with a broke leg in the jail at Paystreak is Karg. Think you'd know him if it was?"

"I'd know the scar," Jim Burdett said. "His mask slipped on the street that day and I had one look at his face."

Buck Canute nodded. "Lew Hackett always played it careful; law officials never got a good description of him. It's said Lew Hackett's brains run the old Hackett crowd. It's just a hunch. But if Karg's in Paystreak, it's a fair bet Lew Hackett's got a hand in the same money pot. Yesterday I swore in a new deputy to take your place over on the Morongo Rim. There'll be a seat waitin' you on the late stage today. You're on your way into Paystreak, Jim."

III

THE girl was wearing a small, tilted hat atop her tawny-yellow hair. She sat across from Jim Burdett in the stage, sandwiched into a corner by the bulk of

a broad-shouldered miner at her side and a paunchy, red-faced drummer of mill and hoist machinery beside him. For three hours the stage had jolted and lurched its dusty way across the plains west of Blakenhorn, while the Sentry Hills climbed up against the sky ahead. Sometimes the girl looked out of the window at her side; again she studied the floor of the coach or closed her eyes. Jim Burdett watched her.

It was near sundown now. The stage gathered speed, pitching into a flat-bottomed creek. Brake-shoes jammed against wheels with a rasping screech; boulders clattered under hoofs of the six-horse team. The leafy green of cottonwoods passed on one side. A low-walled adobe building, flanked by corrals and a big barn-like shed, came into sight around the next bend. The driver swung his team and stopped. Powder-fine dust drifted up in a cloud from the rear.

"Rincon Springs," the driver's husky voice called down from the box. "Twenty minutes for supper. All out."

A hostler, coming across from the corrals, had already started to unhook the weary team. Burdett pushed his side door open and reached up a steadying hand as the girl stepped from the coach. Her hand touched his briefly, and he noticed that her head came hardly higher than his shoulder as she came down beside him in the dust. She smiled her, "Thank you," and went on toward the stagehouse doorway.

Several saddled horses stood at a nearby rack. A couple of heavily loaded freight outfits, hauling the long road, had stopped behind the corrals where men were watering the mules. The girl had already taken a seat at the end of a long table in the stagehouse when Burdett came in. A thin, mustached man in a fancy vest and a barkeep's apron was standing beside her.

"On your way back into Paystreak, Miss Ames?" Burdett heard him ask.

He couldn't catch the girl's reply. Two riders, standing across the room at a small bar, took the barkeep back to his duties. Food was being set on the table by a woman who came from a smoky kitchen lean-to in the rear. Burdett took a chair beside the machinery salesman. Three of the passengers from the stage were miners.

One of the miners was saying, "Sure, it's the richest strike seen anywhere in this country in the past half-dozen years. I hear they got enough ore blocked out on the Golden Belle right now to last six months. That ain't the trouble. The trouble lies elsewhere—mostly along this road. McClendon's lost machinery he needed. Why, nobody knows. Road agents and highwaymen get a lion's share of the gold and money shipments out of camp. Rich as the Belle claim is, they say McClendon's pushed for cash right now to go ahead."

One of the two riders at the bar was watching Burdett with a fixed, close-lidded attention. Presently the pair turned away and left. As they crossed the room Burdett noticed the man's dark-burned, hawk-ish face and caught the quick sidelong stab of his gaze. After a moment ridden horses left the rack outside.

"Somethin's got to be done about it! It's got to be cleaned up," another miner said. "This mornin' in town I heard that Clint Neill has left Paystreak. That means Canute will be sendin' in a new man."

This was the kind of talk that had passed back and forth across the stage since it had left Blakenhorn. Presently a voice called in through the door, "Get your seats, folks. Stage is waitin'."

Dusk was settling over the Rincon stageyards as they went outside. A fresh team stood in harness; the driver climbed up on the box. Watching her sitting across from him, her face a small, pale oval in the half-light, Jim Burdett wondered what circumstances had drawn this girl into the camp at Paystreak and was taking her back tonight. There was something half-familiar about her that kept troubling him. Rincon Springs fell behind.

"Anyhow the road agents don't bother much with stages bound this way," one of the mining men said. "The loot's a heap richer comin' from the camp itself."

The drummer's cigar made a small, glowing coal that moved from hand to mouth. High above the Sentry Hills lifted their black wall, and the plains off toward Blakenhorn disappeared under a black rising mist over which a low moon hung.

The driver stopped and lighted his running lamps, and the stage moved on with the team laboring up the steady grades. This was familiar country to Jim Burdett; in the night he could place old landmarks, remembered from that winter spent in a line shack on the divide and the times he had ridden this way with Buck Canute in the four years since then. But the road was new, laboriously graded out and finished last fall while trouble held Burdett on the Morongo Rim.

Two hours later, with the moon halfway up the eastern sky, they reached the relay station at Summit and fresh horses were hurried out from dim corrals. There was a sweeping wind across the backbone of the hills. Beyond, the road pitched down, bearing off to the southward now, crawling along the rocky lip of a canyon. Burdett let his head rest back on the seat and dozed a while. The stage was rolling steadily through the broken ridgeland that edged Rock Creek when the talk awoke him. "Yonder there, I keep seein' a light," a miner said. "Must come from one of the higher diggin's. Well, another hour or so and we'll be in the camp. Every stick of lumber, every bottle, nail and miner's pick has been hauled in across this road. Sixty miles." His words stopped suddenly. He said, *"What's that?"*

A VOICE beyond shouted some sharp order from the crest of a cut-bank beside the road. The stage rocked over at a dizzy angle, wheels crashing through the roadside brush. The team stopped abruptly; two deliberate shots were fired overhead from the bank. They could hear the driver cursing, trying to hold his frightened team. Moonlight threw thin patterns of silver through the scrub timber atop the bank where Burdett could make out a saddled horse, standing half-concealed.

From the road ahead another voice said, "This is it, driver. Tell your passengers to climb out and line up in the road. Don't make no mistakes!"

The machinery salesman was fishing in his pockets frantically, trying to hide his watch and money under the seat cushions of the stage. Jim Burdett could see the oval of the girl's face vaguely across from him, and one of the miners tossed something small and heavy from a window into the roadside brush. From the box the husky voice of the stage driver kept repeating the orders, urging them to get out calmly and line up in the road. Burdett carefully removed the stub-nosed .38 he carried inside his coat and stuck the gun, barrel first, into the leg of his right boot, pulling the trouser down over the boot again.

He shoved the coach door at his side open and climbed out. The driver had one boot clamped on the brake-bar and was hanging onto the reins, hands stretched out before him. The team stood quiet now, except for a fretting wheel horse. From the cut-bank Burdett's eye caught the gleam of moonlight on a lifted shotgun or rifle barrel, dimly able to distinguish the man behind it beside the saddled horse. The other road agent stood openly in the road ahead, masked by a bandana, with a six-gun in one hand.

"Hurry it up! Hurry it up," he kept commanding.

Burdett helped the girl down, the drummer and the three mining men following, raising hands as they lined up in the road. The man on the cut-bank slid down, brush cracking underfoot, and halted four or five paces distant, still on slightly higher ground. It was a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. The man ahead came back alongside the team, walking with quick, jerking steps. Both were dressed in dusty range garb; shadow under the brims of hats and masks hid anything else. Burdett felt the girl at his side stiffen.

The man from the bank said in a raw, throaty voice, "Reckon that's the one we want!"

The other, coming even with the front of the stage, stepped off to the right with two quick paces. Then, suddenly, the flat of the girl's hands hit Burdett with all her strength and knocked him off balance. Simultaneously, a flash of flame burst from the nearer gun, and at this point-blank range Jim Burdett felt the breath of that bullet ripping past his face. His head was doubled down; he caught himself on one knee and with the same motion threw himself backward between the wheels of the stage, hearing the blast of the shotgun. The stage lurched with the

jump of frightened horses and he was down under it on his hands and knees. Again the shotgun roared and somehow missed him in that shadowed space.

He dodged, crawled; the rim of a wheel raked against him, and settled back with the driver hauling on the reins. Burdett was out on the far side now with the .38 in hand, flat in the brush. The wheels had been as dangerous as gunfire; all this had happened in the span of no more than four or five seconds. Flat-down, he could see the man with the double-barreled shotgun backing off, reloading, while the six-gun still searched for him under the stage with a vicious whang of shots. He lay there and fired back under the stage. At his second shot the man with the shotgun sought the bank's scrub brush.

Burdett quit and, on his feet, started running forward around the jumpy team. He could hear the driver cursing broken words; the passengers, led by the paunchy drummer, had scattered back along the road. Burdett reached the lead span which shied away from him, and stopped, searching for a target. From the cut-bank edge, the six-gun started a new clatter and he crossed the road fast, firing at this flash. The gun quit for a moment; Burdett worked through the stunted scrub. Two more shots followed suddenly, and then he heard a ridden horse start at a run. A second horse broke away, and he could hear both riders crashing off through the farther brush.

The driver had pulled the stage back into the road when Burdett rejoined it, and the miner who had tossed his poke from the window was searching the roadside for it. The others stood beside the stage. Only the girl's quick perception, faster than his own understanding of what was coming, had saved him from that first point-blank shot and the shotgun's blast, Jim Burdett knew. Her face looked dim and small in the moonlight, eyes deep-shadowed pools.

He said gravely, "I have you to thank, ma'am."

"Toughest strip of road a man ever traveled," one of the miners said. "But this wasn't planned for any stick-up job. Right from the start them two had a different purpose in mind. They was aimin' to kill you, mister. That one at the side moved up till he was sure it was you and they had you there between 'em. Mister, what's it all about?"

"I'm Buck Canute's new man," Burdett said.

IV

WALK SIMMS and Charlie Halstead, both well known around Blakenhorn, had bought six hundred head of young trail cattle, two years back, and driven the herd into Rock Creek, planning to graze the *ciénagas* and open meadows and sell again on the fall market. But at fall the market dropped. They had every cent they owned tied up in the cattle, and so had wintered the herd across the Sentry Hills. Charlie Halstead, who could never stand to be idle, had spent the winter cutting lodgepole timber and skidding in the logs with Walk's reluctant help. They built corrals and shelter sheds and a neat two-room cabin to replace the temporary dugout. By the following summer the partners had a good range outfit, and Charlie Halstead, the worker, was well satisfied with the way things had turned out.

Walk Sims, who hated all labor that could not be done from the back of a horse, said no good would come of it. And along in the summer Ben McClendon, who had spent a lifetime poking into far corners after rock, stopped with the partners. Ben McClendon promptly became excited over some chunks of quartz that Charlie Halstead had used to brace up a doorstep. He wanted to know where the rock had come from.

"Oh, yonder," Halstead told him. "Right up there in the gulch."

Before another sundown Ben McClendon had staked his Golden Belle claim in the gulch. The rest came rapidly. A week after McClendon had packed his samples on a burro and started out to Blakenhorn the rush was on. Fifty men were camped in the cattlemen's backyard one evening when they rode in; the next day it was a hundred. Charlie Halstead feverishly began to dig on a claim McClendon had staked for him; Walk Simms simply closed his eyes and knew that his prophecy had come true. The corral

poles, cut and skidded in that preceding winter, disappeared first, used for timbering in fresh cuts or firewood; the sheds and cabin moved away log by log. When there was nothing left, not even the doorsill, Walk put up a sign: "Help Yourself." This was what hard labor, done afoot, got a man.

The road down-gulch passed over the site of the cabin. The Varsovienne Dance Hall now stood on ground where the corral had been, fifty yards away. Beyond, Lingard's saloon and gambling house, the Kingpin, floored with boards hauled in across the Sentry Hills, roofed with canvas, lifted its big flimsy bulk. The Union House stood across street. Saloons, stores, assay shops, mining supply sheds, stage and wagonyard filled the gulch, jammed in along either side of the street.

The hills above had not escaped; no stick of timber stood within three miles; tunnels, shafts, trails, dumps littered the gulch sides. From the street rose a steady blast. The click of gambling wheels and clink of glasses, tinny music from the honky-tonks, the scrape of boots and sound of throaty voices all mingled into one and filled the gulch at Paystreak with a solid roar day and night, lifting to the high ridges.

JIM BURDETT, busy on the Morongo Rim that fall and winter and another spring since the strike, had seen none of this. It struck his senses now with a noisy impact as the late stage clattered in and wheeled up before the Union House. Somebody opened the stagecoach doors. The driver began throwing down luggage from on top. The crowd, drifting both ways along the street, packed up against the hotel walk, watching the passengers climb from the stage.

A tall, solid, muscular man, dressed in immaculate dark clothing and a silver-gray flat-crowned hat, pushed his way through at one side. His face was smooth and slightly swarthy with heavy-ridged brows and a thin, tight-lipped mouth. Burdett caught the rake of the man's smoke-gray eyes traveling over him from head to foot with one quick, appraising glance as he stepped down, and saw him lift his hat to the girl.

"Bring them two cases of champagne I ordered with you, Jake?" the man called to the driver.

"Yep. Right up on top, Mr. Lingard," the driver said. "But you're lucky to get anything in here. More trouble on the road tonight."

Friends were greeting a couple of the miners noisily. Somebody shouldered the girl's luggage and she was gone before Burdett knew it, lost in the milling crowd. He picked up his own battered bag and shoved his way toward the hotel doorway. As he came inside a man in hobnailed boots and a slouch hat stopped him.

"Burdett?" he asked.

Jim Burdett nodded.

"I'm Henderson. McClendon sent me over," the other explained. "We had word from Canute this mornin'. Been expectin' you. McClendon was hopin' he could have a talk with you, yet, tonight."

"Sure. But first I better stake down a bed," Burdett decided. "Things look pretty crowded."

"Clint Neill had a corner room upstairs," Henderson told him. "It's been saved since he left for the next man. The night clerk there will look after your bag."

They went out a side door where an open stairway led up to a narrow gallery above the street, cutting across toward the Kingpin with its big tent roof dully illuminated from the lights within. By a clock Burdett had noticed in the hotel it was after eleven, but this brawling boom camp showed no signs of going to bed. The crowd shifted continually, moving in and out of the saloons and places of amusement, congregating here and there along the street. Past the Kingpin, a store and a tiny lighted restaurant, Henderson crossed through a wagonyard filled with freight outfits and stock, striking a rough trail that led up toward a series of rough board buildings and a big dump extending down the hillside above.

Burdett asked, "Where's the jail here in the camp?"

Henderson stopped and pointed. "Over yonder. Right opposite the wagonyards; there's a lantern hung inside the doorway. Thinkin' of that prisoner Neill brought in?"

"Yes."

They walked on along the trail; tim-

bers, dump cars, track and machinery had been dragged up the gulch side here. Henderson led the way into a lighted office in one of the rough buildings halfway up the slope, where three men were sitting around a table under a smoky lamp.

McClendon, who had started the strike and now owned the Golden Belle, was a large, rawboned man with pale, faded eyes and big work-gnarled hands. He got up slowly from his chair. Burdett had met him around Blakenhorn in the past, and Henderson introduced the other two: Sam Enders, a claim-owner and merchant from the street below, and Matt Sutton who, owned the wagonyards and handled freight. McClendon passed an opened box of cigars.

"Plenty rough job you're steppin' into here, Burdett," the big prospector said. "When I took my first burro-load of samples out across the hills, less than a year ago, I had no idea what I was startin'. Before I could get back news had somehow leaked and the rush was on. That was the beginnin'; the rest just happened like you see it now, so fast I couldn't keep track of it myself. A second vein of fair-to-middlin' rock showed up across the gulch. It's all free-millin' ore. Some of them first miners built Mexican *arrastras,* crushin' out their high-grade that way. That accounts for most of what gold the camp has produced to date.

"But it's a stamp mill proposition. With the Golden Belle opened up and ore on the dump, I got money backing to go ahead. Thirty thousand dollars on a couple loans. Henderson come in to handle that end of things for me and set up the mill stamps I needed. It should have been enough money to start the Belle producin' right, payin' back that borrowed money. I went in deeper, blocked out more ore underground. The ore's there; that ain't the trouble. Some of that first shipment of machinery arrived as expected—but some other parts was lost somewhere. We got along the best we could; shipped a little gold. I borrowed more money."

McClendon paused and lighted the cigar between his teeth. "All this took time," he said. "I kept shifts workin' underground meanwhile, puttin' more rock on the dump. Last week two loads of machinery I'd been waitin' for a month and a half went over the grade this side of Summit. Some of it can be salvaged; the rest is lost. Matt Sutton, here, lost two freight wagons and ten head of mules at the same time. There ain't no reason for it. This kind of a job don't get the road agents anything. They've been takin' their big share out of the gold and money shipments from the camp all the while."

"Seven thousand dollars in one shipment four days back," Matt Sutton put in. "Shotgun guard with the stage was killed. Clint Neill was out in the hills at the time; happened to hit a plain trail into the Sink Holes next mornin'. He brought in one man. Wounded. You know about that?"

Burdett nodded.

McClendon struck the table with one large fist. "I made this strike," he said. "It was a lucky day for me. I noticed some quartz Charlie Halstead had used to brace up his cabin doorstep and next mornin' staked the Golden Belle. But behind that lucky day was years spent searchin' the far hills, trackin' here and there, livin' on beans and sow-belly. And it takes money to develop. The big money, loaned on established minin' property, don't come into a camp like this; not till things settle down. The other kind gambles and wants a share; or it's a stock-promotion scheme with assessments, delay and trouble which can wipe a man out. I owe Jack Lingard twenty thousand dollars; the rest I borrowed come from outside. Control of the Golden Belle is still in my hands. But I don't know how much longer I can keep it that way, buckin' the kind of trouble we've had of late.

"Right now I could make a small bullion shipment of around five thousand dollars which would help," McClendon added. "Got to do it, but I'm afraid to take the risk. Somewhere there's a tip-off on the inside anytime a shipment leaves the camp. Lingard has been runnin' his gold and cash from the Kingpin through the hills with a trusted rider that dodges the trails. So far he's been lucky, but some others ain't fared so well."

"Includin' me," said Sam Enders, the merchant and claim owner.

"What's the set-up in the camp itself?" Burdett asked.

"Jack Lingard takes a leadin' voice along the street," Matt Sutton, the freight and wagonyard owner, explained. "Lingard owns the Kingpin, biggest money maker in the camp; also the Tiptop Mine above. Things in the gulch have been orderly enough since Frank Pressier took over the job of camp marshal a couple of months back. Business interests employ him and pay Ollie Jessop a part-time wage at the jail. Pressier keeps the gunfights off the street, and there ain't been a hold-up among the saloons or business houses since he started. But Pressier's job stops right there, at either end of the street. He pays strict attention to his own affairs and don't go a step farther."

IT was around midnight when Burdett left McClendon and the others at the mine office and went down the rough trail. The moon, riding high in the sky now, silvered the bare ridges, the shacks and dumps. The street of the camp below glowed with the light of its doorways and lamps, and the noisy sound of it rose to his ears. Somewhere a whistle blew with a shrill, echoing blast; and the midnight shift, working the shafts and tunnels of developing mines, quit and started down the gulch-side trails toward the street. Burdett thought again of the girl whose quick judgment and understanding of the wild violence that had its roots in this scene had saved his life tonight.

At the foot of the slope, he headed through the wagonyards, dodging the big-wheeled wagons and mules tied at the feed racks, stacks of lumber and freight unloaded in the lot and the occasional figures of wagonmen and drivers rolled up asleep on the ground beside their outfits. The lantern hung inside the door of the camp lock-up threw a yellow rectangle of light into the night. Crossing the street, he could see that the building was built of stone, roofed with logs and sod, the cut-bank of the gulch behind forming its rear wall. He had come within a few yards of the lantern-lit doorway before the figure of a man, tilted back in a chair against the shadowed stone face of the place, became clear.

The man took notice of him then. "Yeah," he said. "What you want?"

"You're the jailer?" Burdett asked.

"I'm him—Ollie Jessop," the man said. "Keep standin' there in the light while I look you over. Now, what's your business with me, if any?"

Burdett opened his coat to disclose the badge on his vest. Jessop's chair creaked down and he got to his feet ponderously, moving into the light—a thick-set, flabby man with pendulous cheeks and eyes that were small and watery between puffy lids. His tiny eyes looked Burdett up and down. "Buck Canute's new man, huh?" he said.

"That's right. I want to see a prisoner; the man Clint Neill brought in."

"What's the hurry? He'll keep till mornin'."

"I want to see him now."

The fat man shrugged, fished around in pocket for a key, and took down the lantern from its nail inside the doorway. He led the way back, past a second door which evidently opened into the jailer's own living quarters, and unbolted a heavy lock at the end of a short corridor. He pushed against the thick plank door beyond. The room behind it had the bare rock of the gulch side for a back wall.

"Not much doin' tonight. So far, that is," the jailer remarked.

The single prisoner lay on a cot with one leg wrapped around with a layer of bandage and encased in splints from knee to ankle. The man on the cot sat up, dropping his good leg to floor and blinking in the lantern light. He was about twenty-nine or thirty, lithe and muscular in build, with a lean, narrow face and sorrel-red hair that stood up in a thick mane from his low forehead. The scar that cut his left eyebrow made a crooked white line, giving the eye below it a slant, squinted look. The prisoner watched them with a cool indifference.

"This feller just wanted to look you over," the jailer explained. "Everything all right, Joe?"

"It's okay."

The jailer swung the plank door shut again, turned the key in a heavy lock and followed Burdett back along the short

corridor. He hung the lantern back on its nail.

"Well, you had your look," he said. "Make anything out of it?"

"Yes. The name he used to go by was Karg," Burdett said. "Red Karg."

V

HE was sure of it, positive the man was Karg. He left the jail, feeling no elation at this discovery, but knowing for almost a certainty the larger things it meant and what he was facing now in this camp and the outlying miles of broken hills traversed by the Blakenhorn road over the divide.

Ahead two horsemen passed the Kingpin, coming toward him, and crossed the nearer light of the tiny restaurant next the store, swinging there into an alleyway beside the wagonyards. Burdett stopped and watched the two climb from mounts and disappear somewhere behind the row of street-front buildings on that side. He made up his mind suddenly, crossed the street and went into the alley. Both horses were dripping-wet with sweat, he found.

He stood there a while, thinking this over. From the alley he saw the flabby fat camp jailer pass, moving down the street. Burdett walked on, finding himself shortly amid a confusion of back sheds, stacks of crates and old boxes discarded from the stores and saloons along the street. The gulch was barely wide enough to hold the street and buildings jammed into it. He worked his way on through this, pushed up against the rising hillside on his right, without catching any sight of the two riders who had disappeared in here.

He passed the big tent and board frame of the Kingpin with the sound of its games and crowd coming through flimsy back walls to his ears, and cut around into the street again. He stopped once more and looked things over. An uneasiness, a sense of some close-impending trouble, rode him and he could not shake it off. The Kingpin had two entrances on the street. Burdett turned finally into the nearer of these, shouldering past a group of dirt-stained miners who had evidently just come off shift.

A flare of lamps with big reflectors, hung under the canvas dome, lit the place with a strong glare of light through suspended layers of tobacco smoke. The Kingpin's bar, biggest in the camp, reached the full length of the long back wall. Tables and gambling layouts with their players and surrounding knots of watchers filled the front of the huge room between the two street entrances. There were few vacant tables even at this hour, and a drone of voices and steady racket filled the place.

Halfway down the long bar stood the tall, solid, dark-dressed man whom Burdett had noticed in the crowd that met the stage, his silver-gray hat tilted back on his head. This was Jack Lingard, owner of the Kingpin. He stood with elbows up, backed comfortably against the bar, a cigar between his teeth. Beside him, Ollie Jessop, the fat jailer, was drinking a beer. Burdett knew that the man's smoke-gray eyes had spotted him instantly, although Lingard continued to listen to what the jailer was saying, nodding thoughtfully.

When Burdett came close enough to speak, Lingard turned toward him, holding out a hand. "Noticed you get off the stage tonight," he said. "But didn't know who you were, then. Well, it's quite a camp, deputy, while it lasts. Jessop, here, was just tellin' me you've had a look at the prisoner Neill brought in and identified him. Mean anything special?" He glanced at the fat jailer again. "What was the name now? Harg?"

"Karg," Burdett said. "Mormon Pass can make its own identification later. Karg used to run with the Hackett gang; wanted for a mail-car robbery and murder at the Pass. Wanted at Blakenhorn for a job four years ago."

The jailer drained his glass of beer. "Time for me to be gettin' back," he mumbled, and sidled off.

Lingard nodded absently. "The Hackett gang?" Lingard said. "Oh, yeah; I remember now. Well, I reckon there's a plenty of hard customers around this camp. It's makin' a high flare now, but sooner or later all these strikes either peter out or settle down. When that happens there's goin' to be just about two or three big producin' mines in here

and that's all—the Golden Belle, the Cache and I'm hopin' I own the third, the Tiptop Mine."

Lingard raised a hand to his cigar, caught sight of someone across the room and gestured with the cigar. "There's a man you'll want to meet," he told Burdett. "Frank Pressier, the camp marshal. Pressier's made things orderly along this street."

Pressier had come in through the doorway Burdett had entered and stopped inside. He came forward now, a stiff, angular man with a wooden face and cold, quick eyes. He wore two guns in old leather holsters, swung at either hip. Lingard introduced them and the camp marshal's stiff hand met Burdett's briefly, dropping back to his side. He didn't speak.

"Pretty quiet along the street tonight, Frank," Lingard said.

The marshal nodded.

Just then some commotion started at the far end of the long bar. A glass shattered on the floor. A man was whirled around, staggering out a pace or two from the bar; another miner jumped in. A lank, towheaded cowboy swung a long arm. There was a grunt. Others turned; boots scuffled the floor. Players at the nearer tables shifted in their chairs, trying to see.

A crowd began to form.

"Hit my drink. Knocked it outa my hand," a voice complained.

"What d'you think your elbows are?" the cowboy asked. "A pair of wings?"

Lingard stopped the marshal, who moved forward. "Let my boys handle it, Frank," Lingard said. "Trouble maker, that Walk Simms. I've told him to stay out of here."

A husky bouncer with misshapen features and a barkeep had the cowboy between them now and began propelling him toward the farther door of the Kingpin. The cowboy extended his boots, resisting, and the heavy-shouldered bouncer caught one arm at the elbow, expertly twisting it up behind his back. At the doorway they sent him spinning into the street. The bouncer turned and glared belligerently. The crowd laughed and settled back to the gaming tables and its drinks.

WALK SIMMS had just been thrown out of the Palace at Blakenhorn the last time Burdett had seen him, over a year ago. Walk, who, with Charlie Halstead, had been running cattle in here when McClendon made the strike, had a penchant for trouble of this sort or a fight of any kind. Burdett wanted to have a talk with Walk Simms, who had watched the camp grow from its beginning.

He said, "Glad to have met you both," to the camp marshal and Lingard, and started threading his way across the big room.

But when he reached the street Simms had disappeared among its crisscross lights and shadow and other figures moving there. Burdett turned and started down the street; then came back, searching for sight of the lank cowboy. Past the frame store building next to Kingpin, he stopped in front of the tiny lighted restaurant and looked within. Four or five miners, recently off shift, were eating meals at the restaurant counter. Behind the counter was the girl who had been on the stage from Blakenhorn tonight.

She had slipped on a starched apron over her dress, and moved back and forth through a kitchen door at the rear of the counter. Burdett took a last look along the street for Walk Simms, and turned into the restaurant. As he stepped inside, he noticed the sign over the door: "The Medicine Wagon." He took one of the seats at the counter.

The girl came back from the kitchen, smiled at him impersonally, and set food out between two of the miners. Through the door into the kitchen Burdett could see a large negress with a white towel wrapped around her head bending over a stove. One of the customers said, "Sure is good pie, Miss Ames. Tell Jenny I said so." The negress overheard and flashed a smile from the kitchen.

The girl turned to Burdett. "What will it be?"

"Coffee and a piece of that same pie," Burdett said.

It was when she put the coffee down before him that it came to him suddenly, and he saw the scene again: The medicine wagon with red wheels, standing in a vacant lot behind the old Haslop corral;

and a girl with taffy-colored braids handing a cup of coffee through the rails to him, as young Jim Burdett saddled to ride with his first posse. To make it doubly plain was the sign he had read over the doorway here, The Medicine Wagon. She caught the look of recognition in his eyes.

"Remember now?" she asked.

"Yes. Ever since you got on the stage at Blakenhorn I've been trying to figure it out in the back of my mind somewhere. You've changed a lot."

"So have you," she said. "But not so much, I guess."

A couple of miners were leaving and she was busy for a moment. "There's always a little rush after midnight, when the shifts come off," she told him, coming back. "We close at one; then open up at half-past six to catch the breakfast crowd. Jenny's had to handle things alone while I was out at Blakenhorn."

"About what happened tonight," Burdett said. "I didn't want to talk about it on the stage afterwards. But did you recognize either of the men? Know their voices? Was that it?"

"Yes. They were the two riders waiting at the stagehouse at Rincon Springs when we pulled in. Both used to be around Paystreak; they've been in the restaurant here often. At the stagehouse neither pretended to know me. They left and, later—well, I knew who you were. I knew all the trouble Clint Neill had had and the attempts made on his life, and—"

Sitting here, the restlessness that had driven Jim Burdett down the back alley, a sense of trouble waiting close in this night, was still in him. But, coming now, this was the moment he least expected it; and at the same time, with the noise of those first sudden shots breaking along the street, he knew exactly what was happening. Before he could get to his feet stray lead hit some part of the restaurant's face and brought a sudden shower of glass into the place. He said, "Get down! Get down!" starting for the street himself. He reached it in three strides, threw himself outside the door and dove sidewise into the shadows there. A shot whined high, quartering down the street. All the time a six-gun rapped away from the near corner of the wagonyards.

SHOUTS were rising down-street now, and in that incredibly short space of time the street was clear. Again a rifle talked from the place where Burdett knew it must be—the front of the stone jail. He could make out little more, except suspended dust and the shape of a saddled horse that had gone down and was lying there in the moonlight. The jail lantern was dark. The six-gun at the wagonyard corner quit—out of loads, Burdett guessed—and the rifleman beyond threw a pair of close-whining shots at him as Burdett dodged forward. Farther off, horses raced through the night with a clatter of hoofs over rocky ground. He stopped, half-sheltered by a hitch-rail post, and saw the fleeting shadow of a man leave the jail corner. Burdett fired at this.

A voice that he recognized yelled, "Watch him! He'll get away!" and the moving six-gun began a new, fast firing from a point farther up the side of the wagonyards. The rifle quit and remained silent. A lank figure, long legs treading the road dust, ran across from the wagonyards to the jail and rounded the corner where the rifleman had disappeared. There was one more quick shot then. A loose horse trotted past Burdett, and in the distance he could hear those other hoofs throwing back a diminishing racket from some steep rail up the gulch head. The noise traveled off. In the street behind a rising clamor of shouts and voices grew.

Burdett, angling straight across to the jail front now, stopped in the dark doorway. In the black of the short corridor he could hear someone thrashing and kicking about, and reasoned that this was the fat jailer, bound and gagged on the floor. His boots crunched splintered glass and the odor of kerosene was strong. From underfoot he picked up the lantern with a shattered chimney. He delayed a little with a match in hand, knowing that what had happened here was done and finished, but hesitating about a light. He heard boots come running back around the jail corner.

Burdett said, "Walk! That you?"

"Yeah." Walk Simms sounded surprised.

Burdett struck the match and touched it to the soaked wick of the lantern which flared. "Got him away clean, did they, Walk?"

"Yeah." The lank cowboy stopped in the light. "I heard tonight you was in camp; been lookin' around everywhere for you, Jim. Got throwed out of the Kingpin, and I'd come back here to the wagonyards where I'd left my hoss when I noticed the jail was dark. Three-four saddled animals standin' out in front. Still I didn't savvy what was up. Time I got my own hoss and took another look they'd brought the prisoner out and boosted him up in a saddle, startin' off. One of 'em seen me, then, and opened fire. I dropped his hoss. Cool as a cucumber, he took cover at the jail, protectin' the others while they rode."

"Let's have a look in here."

The thrashing form on the floor was the jailer with his legs and hands bound by a length of rope and a bandana gag tied in his mouth. The heavy lock was open, the plank door swung wide. Simms stopped and looked at the jailer. Men from the street crowded up; voices raised a hubbub of excited talk and questioning.

Lingard shoved a way through, pushing right and left. He helped Walk Simms pull the jailer to his feet.

"Slugged me from behind," Jessop, the jailer, kept explaining with the gag out of his mouth. "Piled on me, knocked me down, got the key. Smashed the lantern. Trampled over me, lyin' here helpless. That's all I know; never had a chance. Slugged from behind!"

Burdett said to Simms, "Get your own horse, Walk, and see if you can find me one. Meet me down at the hotel."

Somebody brought another lantern. Burdett saw Henderson, who had met him at the stage and taken him up to talk with McClendon and the others at the mine office, force a way among the crowd.

But four or five minutes elapsed before Frank Pressier, the camp marshal, appeared from around the jail, angular and stiff with the two guns swinging at his hips. Whether that delay meant the marshal had been searching the gulch side and rear of buildings where the rifleman had disappeared or some other reason accounted for it, Burdett could not tell. But there was in him a measuring respect for this hired gunman who patrolled the rough street, and he wished that he knew where Pressier had been.

VI

THE horse Walk had dropped in the street was a rusty bay with a white blaze-face. It looked to Burdett like one of those two sweaty animals he had found in the side alley, and he cut in there briefly. Both animals were gone. He walked on rapidly to the hotel. The night clerk picked up his old battered bag and a key and led the way outside, climbing the open stairway. The clerk unlocked a door at the end of the narrow gallery above the street and lit a lamp within. Burdett saw Walk Simms ride into sight along the street, leading a second horse from the Sutton wagonyards.

"Clint Neill's old room," the clerk told him. "I'm leavin' the key in the door. Best keep it locked when you ain't here."

The room was small with two narrow windows. There was a wooden bedstead with a thin covering of blankets and a washstand with a cracked china bowl and pitcher against the opposite wall. Burdett set his bag on the bed, took out a holstered .45 and strapped it at his hip, leaving the .38 under his shoulder. He hung his coat over the back of the room's single rickety chair and slipped on a leather brush-jumper.

He paused over the lamp, straightened again and went back to the bag. There were a few old letters in the bag. He took out one from Buck Canute, turned it over and carefully marked the way he put it back. He blew out the lamp then, noticed moonlight filtering through the windows and drew the cracked shades. He locked the door behind him and joined Walk Simms on the street below. Walk had borrowed a rifle somewhere which he carried over the saddle bow.

"You know the trails, Walk," Burdett said. "Let's go."

The crowd about the jail was drifting back. Part way up the street Lingard's

silver-gray hat showed out, and the owner of the Kingpin halted them.

"Look here, Burdett! There's a dozen men willin' and ready to ride," he said. "Matt Sutton can furnish horses from the wagonyards. You've got a chance this time. They can't dodge around the Sink Holes with a man that's got one leg in splints. Take enough riders with you to comb that country fine and bring 'em out. You know now what you're up against."

"Big posses raise a lot of dust," Burdett said.

Lingard spat contemptuously. "That's the way Clint Neill used to talk. Finally he brought in one prisoner; now that man's gone—Harg or Karg, or whoever he was."

"I've got to play out my hand the way I see it," Burdett said.

They rode on past the jail front where Frank Pressier stood and watched them pass without word or motion. Looking back, Burdett saw the marshal wheel and start off down the street, continuing his night rounds. Walk struck a faster pace. In a moment they were climbing the steep pitch of the gulch, the hillside buildings and dump of the Golden Belle falling back on the left. The trail narrowed in, abrupt and rocky.

Five minutes later Burdett could turn and see the street far below, a lighted thread. They climbed out of the gulch head into a moonlit strip of rock-studded open ridges, forming a gradual rolling pass to the west. The silence of this top land was unbroken except for the hoof-sounds of their horses. Walk shifted in the saddle, moon-shadow rimmed across his face by the brim of his flap-brimmed hat.

"You figure they'd be ridin' twelve-fifteen miles in the Sink Holes, with that one man's leg in splints?" Wall asked.

"No," Burdett said, and swung off toward a knob-like ledge of rock that rose not far distant from the trail. "We'll sit down here. See what happens, if anything."

They tied the horses around behind the rock, clambered back and sat down in shelter of a sloping crevice, Walk with the rifle across his knees. Walk rolled a smoke and ducked his head deep into the crevice to light it.

"Why," said Walk, "would they go to all that trouble, tyin' up Ollie Jessop and puttin' a gag in his mouth? One blow from a gun barrel would have knocked him out long enough."

"I won't make a guess on that one. But the rest figures out about this way," Burdett said. "So long as Red Karg was in jail at Paystreak, known as Joe Carson, there wasn't any hurry. He might as well stay there till his leg knit and he was fit to travel again. But Clint Neill walked out, and tonight I come in and identified Karg. Maybe tomorrow I'd fix things up to send Karg out to Blakenhorn. So then Karg had to be moved sudden. News of that didn't have time to more than spread around Paystreak. Right now they've probably got Karg in cover, close-hid where nobody is goin' to find him easy. The trouble here don't come out of the Sink Holes, no matter how many outlaws may be hid in that wild stretch. It hatches in Paystreak."

"I know another man that had somewhat the same idea," Walk said.

"Who's that?"

"Clint Neill."

"Why did Neill walk out?"

"Did he?" Walk Simms asked. "Or did Neill just send in his badge to old Buck Canute, pack his things in a couple saddlebags and ride out through Summit so that he was seen crossin' the Sentry Hills, before he turned around and come back another way which wasn't so noticeable?"

Burdett stirred.

"Is that straight, Walk?"

"Neill had no luck in here; things grew worse and worse," Walk said. "He couldn't get nowhere. There was always a leak; somethin' blockin' every move he made. Finally he figured out this scheme—to come back on his own and ride his luck behind the scene. There was only one thing wrong with it. Neill got shot in the arm about twelve hours later. Somebody seen him travelin' through the brush, drew a long bead on him. Neill ducked away into deeper cover and pretty soon it was dark. But he knew he was up against it then. Had nothin' with

him to tend the wound; couldn't look after himself out in the hills with only one good arm."

"Where's Neill now?"

"I got a shack up on the hillside above the camp," Walk said. "Charlie Halstead and me was livin' there together for a while. But Charlie, he's a miner now; so busy I don't never see him. Neill's holed up in the shack."

"Place there where a couple horses could be kept out of sight?"

"Neill's hoss is stabled in a sort of lean-to shed where I keep my own," Walk said. "Charlie built the shed to hold tools and such before he got interested in a different claim. Another two hosses might be crowded in. What's the plan?"

"I want to watch Paystreak while the camp thinks I'm somewhere else," Burdett said. "Why didn't Neill let Buck Canute know?"

"Afraid of a leak along the line. If he just sent in his badge and rode, Canute would send another man. Neill figured he'd have a better chance that way. But he's lost it now." Walk's lank frame tensed. "Lissen! Rider comin' along trail," he said.

THE hoof-sounds faded with some vague shifting of the night breeze, and then came back with a steady pound. From their rocky shelter they watched a horseman top the rise of land out of the gulch and come along the trail, raising a thin streamer of dust in the moonlight.

The man leaned over the saddle, pushing his horse hard. Walk lifted the rifle on his knees.

"You say the word, I'll stop him," he whispered.

"No. Some messenger on his way across country with word that we're ridin'. It all fits in. I want to watch that street."

The rider passed within twenty yards of them, following the trail, and continued his steady run westward. When the sounds died off Burdett got to his feet and started climbing back across the rock toward their horses. From the top he noticed a light that showed from some point high on the south rim of the gulch and studied it for a moment. Walk stopped and turned beside him.

"What's that light, Walk?"

"Lemme see. Must come from the Tiptop," Walk decided. "Lingard keeps sinkin' on the outcroppin' up there, although he ain't yet hit the vein. Always somebody at the mine. Highest claim above the gulch."

They got their horses then and began working back along the north rim of the gulch, pushing through the brush, scrambling over boulders, occasionally following some brief trail. The lighted street of Paystreak became visible again below. They followed the steep drop of the gulch side for a space, struck a lateral easy trail, passed an abandoned tunnel mouth; and after fifteen or twenty minutes, dodging and weaving along the hillside, Walk turned and slid straight down into the backyard of a shack hanging on the slope. No light showed from the shack. They unsaddled and Walk led the horses into a rough lean-to shed.

When they came back around the shack the door was open and a man stood in the darkness there. "That you, Walk?" he asked.

"Me and Jim Burdett," Walk said.

Neill stepped out into the moonlight then, a rather slight, dark-complexioned man with his left arm bandaged and hung in a sling. He stuck out his right. "Glad it was you Canute sent, Burdett."

They shook hands. Neill made up for what he lacked in height and bulk by a wiry toughness of build, and Burdett who had ridden with him that time or two on the Morongo Rim knew that he could strike hard and fast. His jaw was tenacious. Paystreak had played with him, thrown him around and tossed him back, but not yet beaten him as Canute thought. Canute, who stood behind his deputies and expected them to back him all the way, was going to find this good news when he learned about it.

"Got any grub to spare in the shack, Walk?" Burdett asked.

"I'll find some."

In the dark of the shack Walk collected food and came out with a small bundle under one arm while Burdett explained to Neill. Below, the lighted tent roof of the Kingpin looked like a

circus tent; and despite the fact that it was nearly dawn, a scattering of miners and the boom crowd that filled this strike camp, finishing late card games or rounds of the bars, still moved along the street. Walk took the lead again, following a rough zigzag path and presently they stood in the dark clutter behind buildings, back of the hotel. Walk stopped a while, moved on through a space between two walls. They passed the lighted side door of the hotel lobby, climbed the open stairway to the narrow gallery above street and Burdett let himself into the end room with his key.

He locked the door again behind them, and felt his way across the room till he reached the bed and his hand encountered the bag he had left there. Burdett set the bag on the floor, blocked his body between it and the drawn window shades and struck a match. There was no obvious sign that his belongings had been disturbed; but the way he had placed Canute's letter told him it had been moved and read. It had been a careful job.

"This means a lot to somebody, Walk," he said. "No bets are being overlooked. But the room's been searched now so we'll have it to ourselves. Let's get a little sleep."

WALK SIMMS opened sleep-heavy eyes to see thin streaks of daylight around the windows and Burdett sitting hunched behind a slit cut in one of the cracked shades. Walk rolled over, sat up and pulled on his boots. He stumbled across to the washstand and took a drink from the cracked pitcher.

"What time is it anyhow?"

"About nine," Burdett said. "How about breaking out some of that grub for breakfast? Go easy on the water though; that's all we got."

Walk opened a box of crackers and unwrapped a slab of cheese. He carried the food to the window.

"What's goin' on outside?"

"Not much. A while ago Ollie Jessop appeared from the jail. He's sittin' tilted back in his chair in front of the building now. The Kingpin's been swept out; there's a store or two opened up. Earlier the Medicine Wagon did a rush of business with miners and freightmen from the wagonyards troopin' in. That's fell off now."

"Nancy Ames sets out the best meal in this camp," Walk grunted.

"How long has she been here?"

"Since about the first. Drove in from some point out along the railroad with her father in a little red-wheeled medicine wagon, her father aimin' to sell his liniment about the camp. But shortly afterwards he was took down with some ailment; and to support him and herself Nancy started bakin' dutch-oven bread and such for the miners. The little restaurant just grew like you see it there. When her father died, a couple months back, Nancy sent out for that black cookwoman who helps her. You never tasted better pie."

Burdett had been watching the front of the tiny restaurant for the past hour, hoping that Nancy Ames would step into the street doorway where he could see her. But she didn't.

"Things will liven up around noon or a little after," Walk promised.

The morning passed. At noon the fat jailer Ollie Jessop disappeared in the jail building long enough to cook his meal and came back to his chair outside again, picking his teeth. There were more men on the street now. At two the early stage pulled in with a rattle of hoofs and wheels and they could hear the noise of it unloading in front of the hotel. Later Jack Lingard, tall and easy-moving with his silver-gray hat tilted at an angle on his head, crossed the street to the Kingpin. For a few moments Lingard stopped in the near doorway of the big tent saloon and gambling house and talked to the husky bouncer with the misshapen features who had thrown Walk out last night.

"Someday," Walk said from the other window, "I'm goin' to land one on that guy. I don't like him."

At four Frank Pressier, the camp marshal, put in his first appearance on the street. Miners were coming off the first shifts now from the Golden Belle and Cache, the prospect holes and tunnels; and from now on till the night ran its uproarious course and finally quieted the camp was in Frank Pressier's hands. He

walked the street alone, stiff and silent, a hired gunman paid by the saloons and stores and gambling houses to maintain order and nothing more. Again Burdett wondered where Pressier stood in all of this.

Pressier disappeared along the street. Shortly afterwards Henderson, McClendon's right-hand man at the mine, came down the hillside from the Golden Belle and crossed the Sutton wagonyards. The early stage that had pulled in at two still stood where it had been drawn up-street into the wagonyards and the team unhitched.

"What's delayin' the stage, I wonder?" Walk said from his lookout hole. "Usually starts back about three."

Shadow from the steep head walls crawled out across the gulch. The street was alive now, echoing with the tramp of heavy boots and noisy voices and the awakened racket from the places of amusement. Sam Enders, the merchant Burdett had met last night at the mine, came into sight, walking rapidly up toward the wagonyards with Henderson at his side. At the wagonyards they met McClendon whose large, rawboned figure topped the other two by half a head. Matt Sutton, the wagonyard owner, joined them there, and the four stood in a group beside one of the big empty freighters. Fresh horses were being hitched to the stage now. Henderson had picked up a rifle which he held by the stock.

"What d'you make of it, Walk?" Burdett asked. "Last night McClendon told me he had around five thousand dollars in bullion that he wanted to get out. Enders was in somewhat the same fix, I'd judge; he's had trouble too."

"Looks the same to me it does to you," Walk said. "The way they figure it, you're out in the hills, lookin' for Karg, which one way or another will keep the outlaw crowd occupied, either ganged up for a shootout or on the dodge. So it's the time to run a shipment through on the quiet. After dark. The stage has been held for it. McClendon sent Henderson down to tell Sam Enders."

"I reckon so."

"There goes Ruck Means now. Best shotgun guard on the run," Walk said. "Reckon it's a gold shipment all right."

The shotgun guard stopped and talked with the driver who had brought in the stage that carried Burdett last night. Across in front of the stone-faced jail building, Ollie Jessop got up from his chair and waddled inside. Dusk was settling in the gulch now and movement in the wagonyards was less distinct. Presently the driver swung up on top and the shotgun guard followed. Henderson left the others beside the freight wagon, hoisting a small box into the stage, and climbed in after it with his rifle.

THE team swung wide in the street and the stage came past the hotel without stopping for any passengers. They could hear its clatter moving on down street, to strike the long road.

"There she goes," Walk said. "Certain as fate with a load aboard. What do we do now?"

"Follow," Burdett said. "But first we wait a while. Somewhere there's always been a leak that's known ahead on the trails and road. It's got to come from here. Somehow—"

A lantern had come alight inside the jail building now. Ollie Jessop carried it to the doorway and hung the lantern up; then after a moment he took it down and the light disappeared. Once more the fat jailer appeared with the lantern and left it in the doorway for a moment. This time he blew it out, fussing with the lantern as though the wick needed cleaning, before he relighted it again and took it inside. It was dark enough by this time so that Burdett had raised the window shade and, hunkered down with his face on a level with the sill, studied the sides of the gulch above.

"Look at that! Up yonder, Walk!"

A light showed bright and clear in the dusk from the high south wall of the gulch and sent out three long-spaced winks, repeating the signal from the jail. By this time Jessop had returned and hung his lantern in the jail doorway where it burned steadily.

"That's it!" Walk muttered. "From up there that signal could be seen across in the Sink Holes or out as far as Summit."

Burdett said, "We've got to get out of

here now without being recognized. And move fast!"

Other lights were showing out along the street, outlining swinging doors and the figures of men who pushed through or passed. They had crossed the narrow gallery and reached the foot of the outside stairway when a muscular, thick-set man came out of the hotel's side door, turning to the street. He passed Walk almost face to face with Burdett a step behind. Walk moved on rapidly through the space between the side of the hotel and an adjacent building, reaching the clutter in the rear.

The man was the heavy-shouldered bouncer from the Kingpin. Burdett knew he had stopped and turned behind, looking after them. Now they heard him coming back along the space between buildings. Burdett said, "Just keep on goin', Walk. He ain't sure about it." Walk began climbing up the hill, and in the half-light of the gulch Burdett saw the heavy-muscled bouncer come in sight behind the hotel, stop, and after half a moment start climbing after them. Still not certain, the man was following along to see what happened and where they went before making his report at the Kingpin. They climbed on up the brushy, steep slope. But they were going to have to stop that man behind and silence him now, Burdett knew.

Walk dropped suddenly into the trailside brush. Burdett climbed on, making noise enough for two. Walk's shack stood just above when he heard a throaty grunt and the noise of two bodies crashing into the brush. Two men rolled through the brush and rocks down-slope and came apart at arm's length.

The Kingpin's bouncer had learned what he wanted to know—but Walk Simms had one hand clamped on his throat. The bouncer swung, driving in, and tried to throw a shoulder under Walk's armpit while he straightened from his knees. Walk let go of his throat and sent all his weight against the man and both went down heavily again. Walk was on top, and before Burdett could reach the fight and take a hand, he had the bouncer's arm caught at the wrist and doubled back between his shoulder blades. Under him, the man groaned.

"Little trick I learned at the Kingpin," Walk explained. "There's rope at the shack to tie him with."

Burdett came back with a saddle rope, Neill following. Wrists bound, they moved the bouncer up to the shack, and while Walk finished the business of tying him within, Burdett got the horses out and started saddling. Neill's face had a set, tenacious look in the half-light while Burdett explained. A moment later Burdett saw him working clumsily, trying to buckle a gunbelt about his hips with one hand.

"Neill, that gun wound of yours," Burdett protested.

"Look!" Clint Neill straightened, facing him. "I've bucked trouble every day since I first seen Paystreak. I've fought it tooth and toenail and been beat at the game. Now I'm ridin' along with you. There's six loads in this gun and one good hand left to use it with."

VII

CUTTING across the ridge, they joined the road three miles beyond Paystreak and ran on through the night till presently the odor of dust grew strong in the hollows and later they could trace its hazy finger along the road ahead. The night was still and clear with a pale rim of last daylight fading into nothing over the rough horizon west and the rising moon throwing its glow up behind the tall Sentry Hills ahead. Here the road followed the roll and pitch of the side land draining into Rock Creek, climbing and descending; and shortly afterwards they began to hear the rattle of wheels and undergear and the hoofs ahead. They rode up on these sounds till Burdett judged the stage had less than an eighth-mile lead and eased the pace.

They trotted steadily after that, and Burdett knew what this ride was costing Clint Neill with his gunshot arm in a sling. But Neill rode with his back straight and his eyes set ahead, making no complaint. Walk on the other hand sat loose in the saddle, carrying the rifle again, often glancing back.

"There you can see the light again, showin' plain from the Tiptop Mine. The same as we saw it last night," Walk said. "After the signal's flashed that steady light must be the all-clear sign."

Neill said, "That means Jack Lingard's in it up to the neck."

"What's the layout up at the mine itself?" Burdett asked.

"What you'd expect. Couple of shacks, a hoist shed and such, the shaft and dumps."

"That's where they took Karg last night," Burdett said.

Walk thought a while. "Sure. Sure, good trail back along the south rim of the gulch. One of them shacks at the mine to hide him in. You're right!"

The stage slowed and climbed a gradual rise and then for a moment they heard the increased racket as it struck the sharp pitch beyond and dropped abruptly down toward the creek. Here the road veered to the right and took a hairpin turn and cut back to the left before the grade flattened out to a shallow crossing and the road climbed on once more, beginning the long, steady haul up to Summit.

This was between six and seven miles out of Paystreak. The moon was just topping the Sentry Hills.

On the stage ahead Ruck Means, the shotgun guard, kept his eyes on the road, legs braced against the tilt and sway. Ruck was thinking it would be nearly daylight before they finally reached Blakenhorn. He had been on this job less than three months, but already he was the veteran among the other hired guards. Twice he had shot it out in pitched battle along the road, and he could feel the twinge in the pucker of a wound, hardly healed, in his thigh. He was wondering why he kept it up for a hundred-fifty a month; there were other jobs. Cowhands worked harder for forty and found, but lived to enjoy life. He spent all his money anyhow, waiting around between trips.

He said to Jake Ansen, the driver, "What's the matter with that off lead hoss?"

"Threw a leg over a slack trace on the turn, I guess," Jake said. "You better fix it 'fore we start up the long pull ahead."

"Sure," Ruck said obligingly.

There hadn't been any trouble yet. He always felt better across Rock Creek, climbing up toward Summit, although as much had happened there. Ansen bore down on the brake-bar and brought the stage to a halt just before they reached the crossing, and Ruck Means climbed down with his shotgun in hands. Henderson was leaning his head out, wanting to know why they had stopped in a voice that sounded queer and uncertain. Afterwards that stuck in Ruck Means' mind; but now he made his way forward around the team and found the horse had a leg over the trace as Jake Ansen thought. Means leaned his shotgun up against a roadside boulder while he straightened things out.

He had stepped back and was reaching for the shotgun when a man, standing there beside the road, said, "Reach up and pick yourself a star instead; and do it quick, brother!"

Means had never been stopped when he had a fighting chance and he didn't stop now. With the gun right there under his hands he dove for it while a flash licked out at him with a sudden blast and the bullet tore just over his head. Instantly, there was a second shot. But Means was down at the side of the road with the shotgun in his grasp and the boulder right in front of him for protection. He triggered one barrel of the shotgun at the spot where the other gun had been, and heard Jake Ansen yelling at his team. Two guns cut loose immediately from back around the stage, and a horse in the swing span went down. He saw Henderson fire from the stage and the streak of that muzzle flame was aimed against the sky. Scared, Means thought; scared and shooting wild as hell. He unloaded the second barrel of the shotgun then.

This was the broken roar of sound that rose and hit Burdett's ears as they came over the grade and started down. Walk yelled, "There it is!" and whirled his horse and spurred down through the side slope brush to rejoin the turn-back of the road below. Burdett jumped his mount over the road edge with Neill following. They could see dim outline of the stage now and the quick flashes of the guns. Part way down the slope, Burdett changed the course of his run and angled off to come out on high ground at the side of the stage. Before he reached that spot the shooting broke, except for a roar

nearer the creek which was Ruck Means' gun. A voice bellowed warning. Neill had fallen back in this rough going, but Walk's gun slammed out two or three shots right after that. Walk had reached the road below and left his horse.

Through dust and a black-shadowed confusion Burdett saw two men run out across road from the stage. Both were shooting. He quit saddle and let his mount go, bringing his six-gun into action. Jake Ansen had left the box and jumped for cover on Burdett's side of the stage. The stage driver shouted, making himself heard, "That's Ruck Means ahead. By the crossin'!" Burdett began to empty out his hip gun across the road, shot by shot. The fire of a rifle cut back at him, stopped. From about the same position a six-gun took it up, raising a wicked clatter. There had been no shot from the stage that Burdett saw in these few hard-pressed seconds. Then Walk, running along the road, dropped and began a new shooting from that angle.

From the position across road a man dodged off, lost in the deep shadow till his gun streaked once more. Neill was still in saddle. With a recklessness bred from all the defeat he had known in here Neill crossed the road and crashed his mount through the creek bottom thickets after this man. Neill fired twice and then again, and Walk, heading into the same thickets afoot, shouted to Neill. Ruck Means came back along the road toward the stage, dodging a team that was all tangled up in the harness with one of the swing span down; and somewhere a horse that was not Clint Neill's began running through the boulders along Rock Creek. Silence settled along the creek after that.

Ruck Means was muttering, "Waitin' here! Ready to shoot a hoss and stop us and we played right into their hands. Me with my shotgun laid aside!" Means had dropped the man who had been behind him with the second barrel of that shotgun all the same and then gone for his Colt's. He stumbled now at the roadside, and said, "Who's this? Somebody strike a light!"

Burdett had come down around the stage and was crossing the road. He halted beside Ruck Means and lit a match. Means said, "Its Henderson! I thought—" and his words stopped. This was where two men had run across from the stage and a rifle had fired and ceased and a six-gun threw back its quick clatter from the black shadows. From underfoot Means picked up Henderson's rifle.

JAKE ANSEN, meanwhile, had struck another match and lighted the running lamp on the near side of the stage. Walk Simms came out of the farther creek bottom tangle and helped Burdett carry Henderson over beside the stage. Henderson's face was a pasty white, smeared with dust, and Burdett could see where a bullet had torn its way through his shoulder. He began to rip away Henderson's coat and shirt with a knife. Means had lingered behind and after several moments came across toward them with a small strongbox that was wrapped around with rope so that it could be handled easily. Means' face was ugly in the light.

"This is what I figured I was drawin' wages to help protect tonight," the shotgun guard said. "Henderson was along for the same purpose. I'm wonderin' how the box got out of the stage over there!"

Henderson's eyes were open; there was no expression on his white, dusty face. Burdett finished examining the wound in his shoulder and stood back. Neill had ridden up behind the stage by this time and stopped. They waited for Henderson to speak.

"There's one plain explanation," Burdett said. "McClendon hired you, Henderson, to install machinery and handle things for him at the Golden Belle. But other interests paid you more money on the side. Tonight you couldn't get out of comin' along with the shipment McClendon hoped to run through. You knew what was going to happen on the road. You thought you could sit tight, fire a few wild shots and hand over the loot. When it didn't come off accordin' to plan you either lost your head or deliberately decided it was time to throw in your gun with the side that's paid you."

Henderson snarled, "It's a lie."

"I don't think so. So far McClendon's managed to keep control of the Belle in his hands. But time, loss, wreckage on the road were all beating him. Lingard's loaned McClendon money—money he's

stole elsewhere. Better than most men in Paystreak, Jack Lingard realizes that after the strike and boom is over there'll be only a few big-paying mines in the gulch. The same end will kill his business at the Kingpin, and law is bound to come along this road. When these things happen Lingard wants to own one of those two or three big mines, and he's sunk far enough on the Tiptop to know he hasn't got it there. Lingard's after the Golden Belle; that's the stake he wants from Paystreak in the end. This all ties up together. We know about the signals from the Tiptop."

"If Lingard paid me on the side, you can't prove it," Henderson said. "Not a thing."

"You're on your way out to Blakenhorn and a jail that ain't easy to crack," Burdett told him. "We know just about where we're goin' to lay hands on Red Karg, or Joe Carson as you knew him, before this night is finished. I think you better talk. Did you ever hear Lingard called Hackett? Lew Hackett?

"It's nothin' to me. I heard Karg call him that once, yes. So what?"

Burdett turned to Jake Ansen. "Can you get a team lined out to haul up to the relay corrals at Summit?"

"Yeah. Lead span can be shifted back to the swing and four will pull us out. I've patched harness on this road before," the driver said.

Walk Simms circled around from the dark, leading his own and Burdett's mount. "Neill got his man there in the thickets," Walk said. "But one of 'em reached a saddle and rode. I heard his hoss movin' out through the rocks."

Burdett helped Ruck Means get Henderson into the stage. "Turn him in to Buck Canute at Blakenhorn," he told the shotgun guard, and swung again to the saddle.

VIII

PAYSTREAK showed a lighted glow ahead with the walls of the gulch standing high in the moonlight, narrowed in, when Walk and Neill left the road and turned to climb a trail up toward the south rim where the light at the Tiptop Mine still burned with a steady brightness. Walk did not pause, but Neill shifted in the saddle, halting briefly.

Neill said, "Luck. We'll do whatever's necessary at the Tiptop; you can depend on it. Whether we find Karg or not, we'll handle things there."

Burdett answered, "Right," and pressed his horse on toward the camp. During that long run back through the night there had been no sign ahead of that one rider who had moved out through the creek-bed rocks after the fight at the crossing. This might mean the man had followed some side trail or that he was behind, or it might mean that his lead was enough so that he had already reached the Tiptop or the camp. It was a thing that could not yet be determined, but on which much might hinge.

Burdett reached the low end of the gulch street and there slowed his lathered horse.

The same restless, shifting crowd moved on the street; knots of men formed here and there and drifted on again or passed through beckoning, bright doorways. Boots and voices raised a shuffled, muttered undertone with the saloons throwing out their blast and a tinkling burst of music from the Varsovienne leaving no impression on Jim Burdett's mind as he passed. Burdett watched the street with a close and fixed attention, moving his horse on along its course at a steady walk. The canvas top and bulk of the Kingpin reared up on his left with a continual trickle of men passing through its two doorways. Across street now, Burdett caught sight of Frank Pressier's stiff, angular figure. The camp marshal turned, standing up beyond the hotel, and watched him pass, wooden-faced, without word or gesture.

Pressier was paid to keep order along this street with his two guns. But that gave no indication of his loyalty; nor told on which side his flaming guns might stand when it came to a showdown. Beyond, the lantern burned in the jail doorway and dimly Burdett could make out Ollie Jessop's bulky figure tilted back in his chair against the outside wall. Jessop was the lookout on the street with his signal lantern hung on its nail, and sight of the fat jailer placidly sitting there told Burdett that the rider who had escaped from the fight at Rock Creek

crossing had not yet reached the camp. He cut across into the wagonyards and gave his mount to the first teamster he met.

"One of Sutton's horses. Cool him off and rub him down. Been rode hard," he said, and moved back through the wagonyards afoot.

His step was deliberate. When he he could see the front of the jail again, Jessop had left his chair and was standing undecided in the lighted doorway. That meant the jailer had recognized him as he turned into the wagonyards, Burdett knew. He wondered what the jailer's next move would be; it didn't matter much one way or another. Jessop ducked inside the jail finally. Burdett walked on to the corner.

He could look up from here and see the Tiptop sending its steady gleam into the night. There was a stiffening in him, a quickening of all his senses. He thought of Cully Mills again. The thing that had happened inside him that morning when the old Hackett gang had held up the Drovers Bank at Blakenhorn and shot down Cully in the street had changed the whole course of Jim Burdett's life. It had made him want to take a part in that long-waged battle a handful of sheriffs, deputies and peace officers were putting up on the frontier; for four years now he had worn a deputy's badge. Daly Hackett had been killed and Campo Pierce captured at Mormon Pass meanwhile, and Clay Hackett had later met his end in a knife brawl at Socorro. After the Mormon Pass affair Lew Hackett, the middle brother, and Karg had disappeared.

What the course of Lew Hackett's movements from that time till he appeared in the strike camp of Paystreak had been Burdett did not know. Once, four years ago, the Hacketts had made their getaway in the roughs along Rock Creek. Daly, the elder, had been the leader, but Lew Hackett had supplied the brains behind the old Hackett gang; and here in the rush and turmoil of the Paystreak strike he had seen new opportunities, calling himself Jack Lingard. Karg had been with him or joined him later, collecting others of the ever-shifting outlaw crowd. Loot from the road had set Lingard up in the Kingpin. Money loaned to McClendon had given him a financial handhold on the rich Golden Belle. All that was plain enough. The man behind the robbery and trouble, the man Burdett had come to get, had been evident from the time he saw that wink of light relaying the signal from the Tiptop which was Lingard's property and understood its meaning. When he had identified Karg last night he had known Lew Hackett would be that man, whatever name he was using here.

HE was crossing the narrow alleyway that cut through beside the wagonyards when he saw a figure stir there in the shadow of the tiny restaurant. Nancy Ames stepped out toward him, moving quickly. He noticed the way moonlight and a reflected glow from the street caught in her hair and again how, when she stopped beside him, her head came hardly higher than his own shoulder. Beyond stood the raw-framed outlines of the street with the high towering sides of the gulch above.

"I thought I recognized you when you crossed into the wagonyards," she said. There was a quick and anxious sound in her voice. "I've been watching for you all day. What is it? What has been happening since last night?"

"A lot of things," he told her, and now suddenly what time there was seemed very short. Once, four years ago, this girl had handed him a cup of coffee through the rails of a corral as he saddled to ride at the start of that long trail behind, and now she was standing beside him when the end, one way or the other, was very near. He didn't try to figure out the pattern fate had laid in this; but he knew why his eyes had kept returning to the front of the little restaurant all day long, watching for just the sight of her. Things like this happened; a man didn't need to know a girl forever to realize what she meant to him. It could come as strong and overwhelmingly without doubt after a stage ride along a dangerous road, a few words exchanged across a restaurant counter or in a moment like this.

"Nancy," he said, and put one strong arm about her. "Listen! I haven't any right to say this now; but afterwards, if

I come back, there's a place over under the Morongo Rim. A meadow with a little spring; things fixed up neat. Well, I mean—" and then the sound of running boots, moving down street from the jail, came between his words and cut them off abrupt as the chop of a knife.

Jessop ran down the opposite side of the street with a lumbering, urgent stride, cutting across toward the Kingpin before he came abreast the hotel. The jailer carried a gunbelt, strapping it about his hips while he ran. The light at the Tip-top was gone; then it came again with quick, broken flashes and entirely disappeared, and Burdett understood that the signal worked both ways. He held the girl tight against him for an instant, feeling her body give to his, and as abruptly left her, stepping across the alley into the street, arms swinging at his sides, the heel of his right hand just brushing gun holster each stride.

Behind him, her voice was lost. "Jim —Jim, come back!"

From the hillside above came the sound of gunfire—sudden, broken shots that steadied and died away into echoes volleyed back and forth across the gulch. The crowd that milled and moved and sifted ceaselessly into the saloons and gambling houses stopped its motion in the street. In front of the Union House stood a close-packed group, heads raised toward the south rim wall. The drifting chords of music from the Varsovienne came into the street without change, but louder now that the shuffle of boots and voices had stilled. In the clamor of the saloons, under the high tent dome of the Kingpin, filled with its racket from the games and bar, the shooting went unheard. Only the street turned still and silent for a moment.

Just before he entered the near doorway of the Kingpin, Burdett saw Frank Pressier leave the opposite side of the street and start across with his stiff-legged steps, and he knew that of all the crowd out there Pressier had been watching him alone, forming some conclusion. Immediately the smoke-layered lights, the pack and confusion about the bar and gambling tables came before him through the doorway, and a miner, on his way out, jostled heavily against him. Burdett halted there, inside the door, letting his eyes become accustomed to the smoky glare. He located Lingard's silver-gray hat, then, down at the farther end of the long bar; and as he walked on slowly, quartering toward a point at about the center of the bar, he saw Jessop beside him. Jessop had the gunbelt strapped about his fat hips now and one hand clung to the butt of a holstered weapon while he talked with his mouth close to the Kingpin owner's ear.

There was no readable expression on Jack Lingard's smooth, slightly swarthy face. He was smoking one of his black cigars, and only a tautness of muscle, the thin, clamped line of his mouth about the cigar, showed the effect of the jailer's words. A rough, booted miner came in through the far doorway and his voice traveled over the Kingpin: "Shootin' up above the gulch somewhere! One of the claims."

The crowd of men inside began to shift and leave the bar and some of the tables and games, filling the place with a new sound of movement and throaty questions, and men pushed out through the doorways. This transpired while Burdett crossed the big space of the floor, angling toward that position halfway down the length of the bar.

He saw Lingard look squarely at him, still with no change on his face. The old Hackett gang had been caught in some tight spots, and Lew Hackett's headwork had always found a way out. Law officials had never obtained a good description of Lew; and Lew Hackett, alias Lingard, did not know the full gathering force of evidence that now surrounded him.

Burdett saw his glance travel on to a sallow-faced table lookout who sat on a raised chair amid the games and layouts. Some silent understanding passed between the two, and the table lookout dropped one thin, quick hand to the sawed-off gun in its rack beside his chair. Behind the bar, the barkkeep who had helped the husky-shouldered bouncer throw out Walk last night ceased his work with towel and glasses and waited, head thrust forward and his hands out of sight below the bar. Trouble in here occurred often and the Kingpin force knew well how to deal with it.

MEN from inside the big tent-topped saloon and gambling house were still pushing out into the street. But standing just inside the opposite doorway now was the stiff, angular figure of Frank Pressier. Pressier was the unknown quantity in this, and what the marshal's move would be Burdett still could not tell. Sounds from the street, shouts and answers and the noise of boots, grew in a sullen, rising volume that filtered in through the Kingpin's flimsy walls. Through this came the hard-pounding run of a horse's hoofs along the street. Still the man known as Lingard made no move. He was standing as Burdett had seen him here last night, elbows braced up on the edge of the bar behind him. Jessop at his side had wheeled half-around and stepped out a little from the bar.

A dark-burned, hawkish rider with a bloody streak across his face shoved his way violently through the doorway where Pressier stood. Burdett remembered the man from the Rincon Springs stage stop. As he passed Pressier reached out a hand suddenly and caught the rider, whirling him about, and in that instant Burdett knew on which side the camp marshal would throw his guns. The rider's head twisted back.

He called desperately toward Lingard: "Curly and Spike . . . both got it on the road tonight. Shootin' at the Tiptop . . . Karg. No warnin' . . . !"

Pressier with the rider's shoulder gripped in one hand reached with his other and laid one of his long-barreled Colt's across the man's skull. Pressier was holding the gun lifted again as the rider dropped. The table lookout with his sawed-off weapon in hands was watching Lingard, waiting for his signal, when Pressier's voice reached him. "Hold it!" Pressier said. "This has nothing to do with the Kingpin. Don't make a move!"

Among the barkeeps behind the rack, the one man waited with his head thrust forward and his hands out of sight. Motion was suspended in the big room for those two or three seconds, while sounds crowded in from the street. Men stood packed in the two doorways of the Kingpin; players still at the games and tables watched without stirring, few understanding yet what was happening. The way Lingard stood, elbows up, hands resting at his sides, brought the fingers of his gun hand directly over the holstered weapon at his hip. There was the dying whir of a roulette wheel.

Burdett said, "Hackett! Lew Hackett!"

In that instant Lingard moved. Elbows against the bar pushed his body out and his draw was all part of that one movement that set him squarely on his boots, quartering now toward Burdett. Immediately his gun flamed. At his side Ollie Jessop, fingers clutched about the butt of his weapon, pulled and with the gun halfway out of holster suddenly let it fall. In the opposite doorway Frank Pressier, watching the sallow-faced table lookout and judging his move, threw his own first lead that way. The crash of Burdett's gun, following Lingard's shot, and the blast of Pressier's long-barreled Colt's came at the same time, all kicking up one solid roar under the high tent dome of the Kingpin.

Lingard's second fast-triggered shot followed instantly and he was coming on toward Burdett, but something in the man faltered. Burdett fired once more. All over the room men left at the tables and games were diving for the floor or cover behind the layouts with a mad racket of chairs and boots. Ollie Jessop, hands raised head-high, had just had time to back up against the bar. The lookout on his raised chair had sprawled head forward to the floor, and from the doorway Pressier threw a second warning shot into a bar mirror behind Jessop. The barkeep standing back of the rack there threw up both arms.

But in mid-stride, trying to thumb another cartridge under hammer, Lingard had stumbled. He hit on one knee with Burdett moving toward him hardly more than four or five paces away. The expression on Lingard's smooth, slightly swarthy face changed now; his heavy-ridged brows drew down and the clamped line of his mouth drew tighter. There was a straining, awful fury in the man; he was still trying to thumb that third cartridge under hammer when the weight of the gun drew his arm down. All at once he sprawled forward on the floor, slack in every muscle.

Pressier began walking slowly across

from the doorway. Backed against the bar with the gun he had not had the courage to use at his feet, Ollie Jessop began to shake with the reaction, a trembling that spread through his whole body. Pressier walked on with his stiff-legged steps, judging such scenes of violence from a long experience and knowing their end as well as their beginning. He had slipped the one gun he had drawn back into its smooth, worn holster before he stopped beside Burdett. He looked down at Lingard.

"Your job to take him," he said to Burdett, stiff and unbending. "My job to keep order while you went about it. I heard you call him Hackett. Is that right?"

"That's right," Burdett said.

IX

IT was long past midnight when Burdett stopped in front of the tiny restaurant and saw a single light still burning over the counter. He had been up to the Tiptop Mine where Karg was being held till daylight when he could be carried down the gulchside and moved out to Blakenhorn. Walk Simms and Neill had taken a second prisoner with Karg at the mine, a gnarled and shifty-eyed man who apparently handled the signals up there. This man, along with Ollie Jessop and the rider Pressier had slugged in the doorway of the Kingpin, were now behind the thick plank door of the jail Jessop had kept, waiting the same armed transportation that would take Karg out. The force in the Kingpin, the barmen and gamblers and the heavy-shouldered bouncer who had been brought down from Walk's shack on the hill, had apparently known Lew Hackett only as Lingard, owner of the Kingpin and the man who paid their wages, as did the miners who worked the Tiptop.

Tomorrow Burdett was going to take a few men into the Sink Holes and look around. But he knew that the job was finished. Three or four riders had been enough to handle all the actual robbery on the road, timing their movements with the signal from the Tiptop. Burdett was thinking that tonight had written a sort of ending in another way, too. Karg and Lew Hackett were the last of the old Hackett gang, the last to go; and it made a kind of stopping point, a period to place at the end of the years he had worn a badge and worked for old Buck Canute.

The door of the little restaurant opened at his touch, and when she heard his step Nancy Ames came from the kitchen behind the counter. The place was full of the warm fragrance of coffee kept hot on a stove.

"Somehow," Burdett said, "you always seem to have a cup of hot coffee ready when a man needs it most."

She laughed and came back with a cup and they sat together at the little restaurant counter. But somehow what he wanted to say to this girl did not come easily now, and she noticed that her eyes were wide and shy and she kept a little away from him. It was hard to come to the point.

"Old Buck Canute will be sendin' Neill's badge back to him when he learns what Neill had in mind," he explained finally. "And over on the Morongo Rim he's already sworn in a man to take my place. Things have quieted down over there a lot since late last winter. Below the rim is cow country; sheep range the higher ground. It's been settled that way."

"But about that little meadow with a spring and everything fixed up neat?" she asked.

"That's ours," he said. "I've had my eye on it for a long time; managed to get the money and buy it a while back. But till now I didn't know where to find the girl to share it with me. Nice three-room cabin and all the grass a man would need to run his stock. Nancy, that's the way it will be, won't it?"

She nodded, still with that shy look in her eyes; and then of a sudden she was in his arms, giving him her woman's silent answer with her lips.

A Fiction House Magazine

Horses screamed, reared, raced away—riderless.

BADGEMAN'S BREED

By JOHN G. PEARSOL

Old Link Brady had sired them both, tin-star hombre and owlhoot king! But only to one had he bequeathed the glory streak of the gunsmoke breed!

DOWN the blind canyon of the Terlinguas, a lone horseman rode. Trim, well built, and young, he was. He sat his black bronc straight in the kak seat and on his vest front glittered a silver badge. He drew his bronc to a cautious stride as he came nearer the shack. And the eyes of the rider flayed the rocky

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hillside penetratingly. His goal was a lonely shack, set back in the lee of the canyon wall.

Stopping at the corner of the dobe, he threw one leg across the cantle, dismounted, and with an expression of annoyance on his bronzed face, strode toward the door at the side of the building.

At the door he stopped again, spoke to a young fellow seated by a crude table in the center of the room.

"Well," he said, impatience in his tone, "I'm here."

The other raised his head. Blue eyes twinkling, lips curling in a mocking smile, he placed both hands palm down on the table top and rose to his feet. An exact counterpart of the one in the door, he was. The same blue eyes, straight nose, thin lips, and broad brow.

"As I live and breathe," he said mockingly, "my brother, Carl."

Tiredly, Carl, in the doorway, sighed. "What do you want?" he asked. "I got your note. I came here because I don't want you to come to town and disgrace the name of Brady any more than you have. What is it, Buck?"

Buck Brady smiled again. "You'll be surprised, brother o' mine," he said coldly. "We've got a surprise for you. A nice—"

Carl straightened.

"We?"

"Uh-huh—we." Buck waved an arm behind him. "Back there," he said, "there's seven o' my men. Seven gents that you'll be seein' a lot of in th' next few days, while I—while I uphold th' name of Brady." There was a bitter note in his voice as he finished.

Carl Brady's face tightened. "Go ahead."

"Twin brother, yuh're takin' a little rest. Yuh're sheddin' the' badge yuh've inherited from our famous father. An' me—Buck Brady—th' black sheep, I'm takin' th' reins for a few days."

STEPPING to the door at the back of the shack, Buck Brady opened it. He called, and seven hard-faced hombres, all with twin guns about their waists, filed silently into the room. Carl Brady's face paled as they eyed him. Buck smiled.

"Still kinda—ah—timid," he said softly, "eh, Carl?"

His brother said nothing, but a flush mounted his cheeks.

"Just like two peas," went on Buck to his brother, "you an' me. Just alike except in—well—disposition. So we'll change clothes for a while, Carl. I'll take your duds, your bronc, an' your gun. I'll pin th' old gent's badge on m' manly boozum, then *I'll* be sheriff."

He laughed as he watched the fire flicker in Carl Brady's eyes.

"Make yuh all riled?" he taunted. "Well, listen to some more. After we change places, I ride back t' Bradyville. I'll putter around till tomorra noon, then I'll get word that there's been an awful crime committed by some bold badman, somewhere up north o' town. I'll get real industrious. I'll scrape a posse together—a big posse—every darn man in Bradyville that can carry a gun—an' I'll take after these gents. But while I'm gone, with all th' fightin' men of th' town, *my* men come ridin' in t' Bradyville. They'll stop at th' bank, and then, my sanctimonious star-toter, who'll be there t' stop 'em from cleanin' th' town?"

Two of the men standing behind Buck Brady laughed coarsely. Buck smiled again. "All right," he rapped sharply, "boots first. I want all your clothes. Everything yuh got on yuh. Strip."

"Yuh dirty—"

"Shut up! Shut up! Strip! Don't waste your breath. Either take 'em off yourself or we'll pistol whip yuh an' do it for yuh."

Both Bradys, Buck matching his brother Carl's every move, changed clothing.

"Good stuff," said Buck, arrayed in Carl's attire. "Yuh're kind sporty, eh, Carl? Nice boots—bench mades. Five-X Stetson. Linen-laced belt an' holster. Boy, yuh're all dressed up, ain't yuh?"

Flushing, eyes glinting angrily, Carl Brady stood up.

"I never thought," he said slowly, "that anybody could get so low down that they'd pull a stunt like this on their own twin brother."

"Brother! Humph! Remember when th' old man kicked me out? I stuck out my paw to you. I said, 'Good-bye, Carl.' And you stuck yore clean han's down in yore jeans pockets, an' went in th' house. Brother! Hell!"

Buck Brady curled his lips downward. Sneering, he jiggled his brother's gun in its holster.

"Gimme my own gun," he said. "This hammer is for a amateur. And"—he added, looking up at his brother—"yuh got a man's duds on, Carl. Try an' act like one."

"An' you," said Carl Brady hotly, "you got yore dad's badge on yore vest. Think about that."

"That don't need any thinkin'. Old gogettum wore it because he got paid for it. Same with you. Take th' salary away an' there'd be no more sheriffs. Don't get mushy."

DESPITE the startling physical similarity in Buck Brady and his brother Carl, Buck's actions were edged with caution when he rode into Bradyville on his brother's mount. Smiling slightly, he pulled up before the sign that said "Sheriff's Office," and dismounted. Opening the door, he stopped.

An old man, grizzled-headed, his brown face lined, was sitting on a chair in the office. He eyed Buck speculatively. Though the man's face seemed familiar, Brady didn't know him. He'd have to be careful.

"Howdy," Buck said to the old gent, nodding. Then stepped to a chair and rolled a querly.

"Carl," said the old man, as he watched Brady with something like contempt in his eyes, "if it's anyways possible, old 'Flick' Brady's turnin' over in his grave right now."

Brady struck a match with his thumb nail, puffed on his querly and eyed the older man.

"Yeah?"

The old man hit his knee with his clenched fist. "Yeah," he growled throatily. "Yo're dam' right he is. An' me—some o' th' other oldtimers that rid beside yore square-shootin' dad, we don't like a dam' bit th' way yuh're doin'."

"No?"

"No! An' listen—if you don't clean up this coyote pack that's makin' a disgrace outa th' name o' Brady, w'y we'll do it for yuh. We'll do it for th' gent that wore th' star yuh're sportin' on yore vest. We'll bring in enough punchers t' take Bradyville plumb apart, an' we'll keep 'em here till she's clean."

One foot at a time, Brady took his boots off the desk top. He puffed once at his querly, then threw it away when no smoke came from it.

Enough punchers to take Bradyville apart, staying in town till it was clean, didn't suit Buck Brady, not at all. In two days, according to Buck Brady's plan, there would be *nobody* in town.

"All right," he said, "now jest tell me what's to be done an' I'll do it."

He stood up, hitched up his gun belt while the old man's eyes followed his movements.

"Shoot," he said. "What's first on th' program?"

From the top of Brady's cream-colored Stetson to the toes of his polished boots, the old man's gaze swept. Then back again. His eyes clung to the walnut-handled gun in the linen stitched holster at his hip. He smiled faintly.

"All right, Carl," he said softly. "I don't know whether yore memory's gettin' bad or yuh're just bein' a mite nasty about it, but put Ringold Pete in jail for killin' old Ranny Williams, close up Faro Fannin's crooked games, an' make it safe for a decent woman t' walk down th' street. Then I reckon th' Circle-W punchers can stay at home."

CIRCLE-W! That was it! Brady had it now. Old Jake Walker. Used to jigger Buck Brady up and down on his knee when Buck was a younker.

"Keno, Jake," said Brady. "Keep yore cow-pokes ridin' range. Them three little things will be done inside o' forty-eight hours."

Silently, the smile lingering on his lips, old Jake Walker watched Buck Brady step to the office door. Hand on the knob, Brady turned.

"Adios," he said. "I'll be gettin' about m' business."

Walker nodded. "Uh-huh," he said. "That's a good idea, son. I was beginnin' t' believe that th' blood o' old Flick Brady was turnin' a kinda light shade in his kid's veins. I'm glad t' see it ain't."

"Yeah, uh-huh," Brady muttered abstractedly as he went out the door.

Brow corrugated, he strode down the street. Who the devil was Ringold Pete—the gent who had killed old Ranny Williams? Put him in jail? Brady snorted. Good old Ranny. Why Carl Brady hadn't gotten Ranny's killer was more than Buck Brady could understand. Ranny Williams had been old go-gettum's deputy for years. Jiggled both Buck and Carl on his knee when they were buttons. Buck Brady smiled coldly. Not because he now had a star on his vest, but Ringold Pete would go to jail—or hell!

And standing in the door of the sheriff's office, old Jake Walker watched Buck Brady march down the narrow boardwalk. Jake Walker smiled, too.

"Carl Brady," he murmured softly. "Carl Brady with a walnut grip on his gun. Carl Brady lookin' a gent in the eye an' sayin' that them little things would be done. An' with a slip-hammer in his Colt—hell."

Stepping to the street, old Jake Walker strode to his bronc.

"Git, bronc," he told his horse as he mounted. "Buck Brady has come home. An' I'm afraid th' dang hellion ain't up to no good. For old Flick Brady's sake, we'll keep an eye on him."

THROUGH a double door, over which hung a sign reading, "Fannin's Faro Palace," Buck Brady entered a long, smoke-filled room. Only dimly, after eight years' absence, did Buck Brady remember a few of the faces. He stepped to the bar, leaned against the mahogany.

"Ringold Pete," he asked the barkeep, "where is he?"

"W'y—" started the barkeep, passing his eyes about the long room, scattered sparsely with men.

Brady, watching him, saw his eyes light as he sighted someone.

"There," said the barkeep, pointing toward the back of the place.

"Call him here," said Brady, not turning.

Quizzically, the barkeep studied Brady for an instant. Then: "Hey—Ringold—come here." He waved an arm.

Brady turned. Big, lumbering gaited, a giant of a man, a brown paper querly hanging loosely on his thick lower lip, strode with long steps toward the bar.

"Well?" he inquired growlingly as he drew near the bar.

The barkeep jerked his head toward Brady.

"Him," he said shortly.

Contempt in them, Ringold's flaky eyes flayed Brady from head to toe.

"You," he asked incredulously, "you asked me t' come t' you?" He smirked. "What for?"

Lids heavy over his eyes, Brady's lips curved downward as he slightly inclined his head.

"Yore sabe," he said, heavily sarcastic, "is workin' overtime. Yuh're under arrest. Put up yore hands."

The room, still before, quieted to an ominous calm. Through flaring nostrils, Ringold Pete snorted, stayed unbelievingly. Looking at Brady's right hand with its thumb hooked in the cartridge belt, he started a disdainful laugh. He stopped it. Face twisted, hand slipping toward the gun at his hip, he took one step forward.

Another gent, slim, dark-faced, his black eyes shining with a glowing light, slipped forward from the few behind Ringold. To one side of the big man, he stopped. Ringold Pete threw out his left hand, spoke to this dark-faced gent.

"Wait, Fannin," he said, "I'll fix 'im."

FARO FANNIN smiled coldly. "Shut up, Pete," he ordered, voice oily. Then: "An' what," he asked of Brady, "is th' charge against Ringold, Carl? Ain't yuh talkin' kinda wild?" There was menace in the softness of his voice.

Eyes on the big, sneering face in front of him, Brady watched Ringold, while he spoke to Fannin.

"Ranny Williams' murder," he said. "An' he's comin' with me, Fannin."

Faro widened his eyes. The whites showed startlingly around the jet-black pupils. Sucking in his breath sharply, Ringold's hand crept closer to the gun at his hip.

"So?" asked Fannin softly.

"So," said Brady. "Put up yore hands, Ringold."

Fannin's eyes lidded. "Go ahead, Pete," he said, as Ringold's hand jerked slightly. "Put 'em up. Do what he says." His eyes still froze to Brady's.

Slowly, hate in his eyes, Ringold raised his massive arms shoulder high. Stepping lithely forward, Brady jerked the big man's gun from its holster, stuck it in his own belt. Brady smiled coldly.

"Follow me out th' door," he said to Ringold.

He backed to the portal, eyes on the group in the saloon. Faro Fannin' like a smiling, black-eyed snake, watched him.

"I'll be up t' see yuh, Carl," he purred softly. "Wait for me."

"I'll be right there," said Brady coldly. "An' I got a bit o' business with you, too."

Fannin's cold sneer followed him through the door. Ringold Pete, his deep voice venomous, growled throatily as he preceded Brady up the street.

"Yuh pore fool," he rumbled. "Yuh're crazy. If you go through with this, I'll spill my guts. I'll tell everything I know. Then where'll Mister Carl Brady be?"

Buck Brady smiled at his back. "An' just what," he asked the big man softly, "just what all do you know, big fella?"

Viciously, Ringold cursed. "I know," he promised gratingly, "that if Faro Fannin don't kill yuh—yuh'll hang."

Buck Brady raised his eyebrows. So Carl Brady would be hung, eh? And Mister Ringold would talk? Maybe Ringold would talk before tomorrow noon. Tomorrow noon, when Buck Brady planned to lead a posse on a phantom hunt out of Bradyville. Maybe Ringold Pete would talk enough so that Buck Brady *couldn't* take a posse out of town.

BRADY smiled mirthlessly. He glanced up the street. Except for two men across and far up on the other side, it was empty. He looked behind him. One man stood in front of the Faro Palace doors. While Brady watched him, he went inside again. So Ringold Pete would talk—

Leaning forward as he stepped lightly in the rear of the big man, Brady spoke sibilantly.

"Ringold," he whispered sharply, while he smiled at the center of the big man's back, "step an' turn around. And when I finish, Ringold, you move fast. It'll be th' only chance yuh'll have."

Pete stopped, spun around. Wide-eyed, he watched Brady sway on the balls of his feet. Ringold's tongue flicked out, wet his lips.

"Yore gun's in m' belt," Brady went on icily. "I'm throwin' it on th' ground. When I do, Pete, you dive for it. Dive fast, an' come up shootin'! Yuh're not gonna do any talkin' at all, Ringold. Yuh're through talkin'. I'm not Carl Brady—I'm *Buck* Brady. Me—my men 'n' me—we're robbin' th' bank tomorra. Now! Dive for it, badman! Dive—"

Cursing shrilly, Ringold swooped after the gun that left Brady's hand. Up he came, like a wave of hate, gun hammer back! Brady twisted, writhed sidewise. His right hand leaped. His gun cracked. Like a giant pine, Ringold Pete swayed, toppled, fell on his face. Blood on his lips, eyes glazing fast, he breathed bubblingly on the ground. Brady stepped closer, squatted beside him.

"Die," he said coldly, "die because yuh killed Ranny Williams. An' die with yore mouth shut. If yuh try t' talk I'll pound yore teeth down yore throat with m' gun barrel."

"You—got lotsa surprises—comin'—" Then the bubbles on his lips burst no more.

Then Brady rose, faced the crowd that was gathering.

"He made a break," he told them, waving toward the dead man.

"He won't make no more," said one.

Faro Fannin fixed his jet eyes on Brady's. Buck smiled at him.

"Th' county's saved some coin," he said.

For an instant, Fannin's black eyes blazed. Then he, too, smiled suavely. "Uh-huh," he said, "on *that* one."

Brady turned. As he strode away the crowd talked behind him.

"Like th' old man comin' back t' life."

"Th' kid is showin' his blood at last."

Buck Brady smiled. If they only knew! To hell with blood, badges, and with old go-gettum, too. The old man might have been a good sheriff, but he was a dam' poor father. Kicked a fellow out. Well—tomorrow—at noon! Bradyville would have something else to talk about.

FANNIN! Faro said he'd be up to see him. Brady took his boot heels off the table top and slid his gun belt up on

his hip as he heard footsteps on the boards in front of the sheriff's office. Easy, as though with the weight of a light person, or by reason of being cautious, the footfalls were soft. Glancing at the shaded windows, sliding the oil lamp to the back of the table, Brady rose to his feet and stepped to the far side of the room.

Slowly, cautiously, while he watched cold eyed, the door swung inward. Then Brady gasped. An old lady, hair white, gold-rimmed spectacles covering her pale-blue eyes, stepped inside the room. Turning, she surveyed Buck with a sympathetic smile.

Recognition came to Brady as she stepped toward him. Ma Williams, Ranny's wife. She came close to Buck, raised her thin hands and grasped him by both sides of his vest.

Fiercely, while tears came to her eyes, she shook him.

"Carl Brady," she said, low-voiced and tremulously, "you showed 'em. They said you was a yellow-bellied coyote. They said you took money from Faro Fannin. They said you didn't arrest Ringold Pete because you was in cahoots with Faro. An' I told 'em. I told 'em that old Flick Brady didn't breed coyote blood. I told 'em that, Carl. An' now you've showed 'em. You've paid th' score to Ringold Pete." Tears came down from under her spectacles, coursed over her withered face. "An' I thank you, boy. I thank you. It was fitten that a Brady should do what you did to th' killer of—Ranny Williams."

Swallowing hard, Brady patted the thin hands that grasped his vest so fiercely. His smile was tender as he looked down at the misty eyes of old Ma Williams.

"There, there, Ma," he said as he patted her shoulder and piloted her toward the door. "Don't cry. We fixed it all up. I only wish I could o' fixed it—a—a little sooner."

He stood in the door and watched the halting figure of the little old lady vanish into the darkness of the outside. He turned, and as he closed the door behind him, he brushed a tear from his eye.

"Hell," he said disgustedly. Then he strode angrily to the chair by the table and seated himself.

So the folks at Bradyville were saying that Carl Brady was a yellow-bellied coyote! They said he was in the the pay of Faro Fannin. But little old Ma Williams told 'em. She told 'em that Brady blood didn't run in coyote streams. She said it was fitten that a Brady should gun the killer of Ranny Williams. By dam', she was right! A Brady did get him. A Brady that didn't have coyote blood in his veins. Buck Brady—outlaw. He was going to rob a bank tomorrow, but he'd do it like a man. He'd get his money crooked, but not from a crooked tinhorn.

He got to his feet and walked to the door. Out into the street, and in the darkness toward Fannin's Faro Palace he strode. Down to the swinging doors. Pushing them open, he entered.

IMMEDIATELY the place quieted. Fannin, black eyes venomously bright, stared snake-like at him, as Brady stepped to the bar. He watched, his face wreathed in dark lines, and turned his lips down disparagingly. His hand crept toward the gun at his slender hip as Brady stepped slowly along the bar, gathering the bottles off its scarred top.

Like the far-away tinkling of tiny silver bells, sounded Fannin's spurs in the quiet of the room as he stepped cat-like toward Brady. Little indrawn breaths of astonishment came from the crowd, sounded sharply in the silence, as Brady tossed bottle after bottle off the bar into the hands of the wide-eyed barkeep.

The full length of the bar, Brady worked his way. At its end he turned. Eyes on Fannin, he gestured to the empty bar.

"Gents," he announced, "with not a bit o' regret, th' Law of Bradyville announces that Fannin's Faro Palace is closed—henceforth an' forever. Start leavin' by th' front door. Any gents that feel like augerin' can step right up. Start movin'."

The dropping of a pin could have been heard. Graven in stone seemed Fannin. Slowly, while his beady eyes burned at Brady, he gestured with his left hand.

"Pinto," he called, still watching Brady, "Matsen—Ruller—come here."

His voice was soft, and his snake-like eyes glittered more brightly, while the whole room waited, and three men stepped beside Fannin. Fannin, poised alertly, talked in a sing-song tone to his three gunmen beside him.

"Mister Brady," he purred, sarcasm in his voice, "Carl Brady, th' son of old Flick, has just told us that th' Palace is closed. It won't never close—till I want it to. I'm gonna tell this star-totin' bluffer t' get th' hell outa my place o' business. An' if he don't leave, we'll drag 'im out—by th' heels!"

Fannin stopped, wet his lips with his tongue. The three beside him, little by little, spread their feet apart.

"Git," he snapped to Brady.

RIGHT hand still hung on his belt, eyes slitted, head cocked a bit to one side, Brady smiled sneeringly.

"Put up yore hands, Fannin," he said, "or start 'em movin' fast. I'll count three. One—"

"Whoops! Old Flick Brady *is* come t' life!"

An old gent, grizzled jaw out-thrust, prodded his way through the crowd, strode toward Buck Brady.

"Give 'em hell, kid!"

Another yell from the crowd. Another oldtimer elbowed forward. The two of them, grinning expectantly, circled to beside Buck Brady. Ranged beside him they waited, watched Fannin, his three gunmen.

"Two," said Brady.

Nervously, the three gunmen flicked their eyes toward Fannin.

"Three," Brady said.

Hand leaping, Fannin cursed. Brady twisted, writhed sidewise—the same kind of draw that had killed Ringold Pete. Flame spouted from his gun muzzle. Fannin gasped, "whoofed" from his mouth like he'd been kicked in the stomach. He dropped his gun, clutched his middle. He fell on his face, kicking. The three beside him raised their hands in air. Brady nodded at them.

"Hightail it," he ordered. "Bradyville don't need yuh. Be outa town in thirty minutes."

His eyes whipped the crowd again. On the floor, Fannin's legs had ceased to move.

"Fannin Palace is closed," Brady announced again. "It's gonna stay closed. Leave by th' front door."

The two oldtimers beside Brady grinned, watched the crowd leave. They turned on Buck.

"By damn," said one, "I know I'm dreamin', but I don't want t' wake up. My old side-kick, Flick Brady, is come t' life again."

He slapped Brady on the shoulder, started toward the door.

"Which all," muttered Brady, as he watched them leave, "will keep old Jake Walker an' his punchers on th' Circle-W. An' what d' I care about side-kicks an' rheumatic old men as long as th' coast is clear tomorrow—about noon."

SAND. Rolling hills. High, the sun blazed fiercely down on a cavalcade of riders, Buck Brady at their head—a posse from Bradyville. Chasing a mythical bandit in the hills, they rode away from town. Brady, watching the sun, dropped to one side of the single line of riders. He stopped.

"Keep goin'," he instructed them as they filed past. "Rake th' *Aguilla* hills. I got a hunch. I'm gonna scout around a bit."

Unquestioning, they nodded, obeyed the instructions of the sheriff who had just

Brady twisted sidewise—the same kind of draw that had killed Ringold Pete.

taken Bradyville to a cleaning. At their backs as they rode on, Buck Brady smiled coldly.

"Fools," he muttered, "ridin' after *El Rojo*—an' leavin' Bradyville Bank to th' tender care of th' son of old go-gettum."

He laughed deep-throated, reined his bronc about, and started on the back trail. He glanced up at the sun. High in the heavens, it was. Nearly noon. Then Brady stopped. Far to the south of him, a speck moved on the sandy hillside. Brady watched closely. It moved again, looked like a man, afoot. Brady urged his bronc forward.

Drawing closer, he saw it to be a man, staggering, weaving, one wounded or sick. Up, then down, and up again, he came staggering down the slope toward Brady. Then he fell on his face, didn't move as Brady reined in, dismounted at his side.

Squatting at his side, Buck turned him over. Then laid his head back again. It was Carl—his brother. Cursing softly, Buck felt for a heart-beat on the blood-stained chest. It was faint. A mixture of emotions on his brown face, Buck Brady looked down at the pale features duplicating his own. Slowly, Carl Brady opened his eyes. He smiled faintly, reached up a hand toward Buck's own.

"I—got—away," he gasped weakly. "They—got me—though." His eyes closed again. His chest, rising with difficulty, then down again, moved more slowly.

"Scared," he muttered, eyes still closed. "Yella. Scared—t'—play th' game—th' old man dealt. They thought I was crooked. Wasn't—jes' yella. Folks didn't sabe—how a Brady—didn't have guts. Took money from Fannin—scared—t' refuse it."

His eyes opened again. His hand reached up. "I—wanna—shake," he whispered gaspingly. "Will—yuh—now?"

As Buck Brady clasped his brother's hand, Carl Brady smiled.

"Ain't scared—no more," he whispered, voice weaker. "Wish I—c'd die—with a gun—in m'—hand—like a Brady—"

His breast ceased to move. Though open, his eyes saw nothing. Whimsically, Buck Brady smiled down at the pallid face. A gun in his hand—like a Brady. Gently, Buck laid the lolling head off his lap.

"Old son," he murmured, "it was eight years late, but we got that handshake." Then he brushed a hand hurriedly across his eyes.

He rose to his feet, looked earnestly down at the dead form. Slowly, he removed the big cream-colored Stetson from his own head. He took from his own shoulders his brother's vest with its sheriff's star. And as he did, well on the other side of Bradyville, seven riders jogged purposefully toward town.

Straight up in their kak seats they rode. Their faces, set, stone-like, showed lines of hard living. The leader, tall, dark-faced, glanced speculatively at the sun climbing steadily above their heads.

"Nearly noon," he announced. "When we git there, ride slow. Straight through town, but don't hurry. Th' bank's at th' far end o' town. Pratt stays on his bronc outside with th' horses. Farley an' Bissell stop at th' bank door. They'll stop anybody Brady couldn't get out o' town. Th' rest of us goes inside. Everything clear?"

"All but what happened to that brother o' Brady's," answered the next in line. "What if he gets into town?"

The dark-faced leader chuckled. "Not him," he promised. "We hit him—bad. With him losin' all th' blood we saw on th' trail, he'll die before he gets halfway. Dead now."

Then on they rode, toward a gunless town. A town stripped of its fighters by Buck Brady. On an easy stick-up, where their only opposition would be perhaps a spectacle-wearing storekeeper, or a white-collared bank clerk. The leader grinned.

"This," he said, "is gonna be th' easiest job we ever pulled. We're nearly there. Look pious."

DESERTED, baking in the sun, seemingly waiting for the two groups of riders that came into town almost at the same moment, was Bradyville.

Coming fast, at the west end of the town, galloped a bronc, carrying double. In a dust cloud, it slid to a halt in front of the Bradyville Bank. Buck Brady, his brother in his arms, dismounted. Running, calling loudly as he ducked low, he deposited his brother to one side of the door of the bank, out of sight of those within.

"Lock yore doors," he yelled, while he squatted beside the upright propped form of Carl Brady. "Git down behind th' counters. Hurry! Hell's a-comin' down th' street!"

Locks clicked behind him as the gentle tap of horses' feet sounded from the upper end of the street. Seven riders, riding slowly, glancing with seemingly careless eyes to the right and left, drew nearer to the bank. An old man, white-headed, black protectors on his shirt sleeves, came out of the hardware store, looked after them as they passed. Then he shrugged and went inside again.

On the seven came, drew their broncs abreast as they came to the bank. The tall, dark leader threw a meaning glance toward the last rider in line as he started to swing his own leg over the kak cantle. Then he froze.

"Hell's fire!" he cried shrilly.

His hands moved. Smoke and flame spouted from along the line of seven riders. Flame spouted from the cove-like entrance to the bank door. Flame from two guns, roaring fast; while smoke puffed swirling in the narrow entrance.

The sharp crack of shots mounted to a steady roar. Smoke swirled like billowing clouds. Horses screamed, reared, raced away—riderless. Throaty curses, groans, shrill yells of hate, punctuated the thunder of pistol music.

One—two—three. Like nine-pins they fell before the fire from the protected doorway. Staggering, shirt-front blood covered, two guns in his hands, Buck Brady slipped down beside the form of his brother.

Face convulsed, Brady shot again. Another fell. Wincing as lead burned him, Brady raised a wobbly arm. His gun spat, fired a last shot as a horseman raced away from Bradyville. Raced away from six dead men in the road. Pounded away from Buck Brady, who crawled painfully toward his brother, propped against the bank door.

TEETH showing in a grimace of pain, Brady crawled. Both guns still in his hands, blood bursting in little bubbles on his fast-graying lips, he reached his brother's side. Groaning with effort, his head falling forward as he pushed out his hand, he thrust a hot-barreled pistol in his dead brother's hand.

"A badge on yore vest," he muttered grittingly, "an' a gun—in—yore fist—like a—Brady."

There was a smile on his lips as he flopped inertly and a group of spectators gathered.

The posse Buck Brady had left in the hills thundered into town. And with them came old Jake Walker of the Circle-W. Awestruck, they gazed down at the two dead brothers, Buck and Carl Brady, a hot, powder-fouled gun in the hands of each. Wisely they shook their heads.

"Buck an' Carl," they said, "chips off th' old block. Both of 'em. Buck, he musta come t' help when Carl was doin' his good licks. Or mebby it was Buck that got word t' Carl about the bandits in th' hills."

"No tellin'," said another. "Nothin' is sure about these Bradys, except they play out their strings, like men, alone."

And nobody noticed that, in the hand of Buck Brady, was the same slip-hammered gun old Jake Walker had seen and commented on in the holster of him who paraded as Carl Brady, sheriff. They only saw that Carl Brady had a badge on his vest, a gun in his hand, and had died like a man—a Brady.

All but old Jake Walker. And he, though nobody noticed, stood longer at the two new graves marked with crude crosses, which now were beside that old one of old Flick Brady. And he muttered softly as he looked misty eyed at the cross bearing the name of Buck Brady.

"*Gracias,* oldtimer," he murmured, "*Gracias* for my old side-kick, Flick. He'd a-wanted it that way."

For old man Jake Walker had noticed that the body of him who wore the sheriff's star and the cream-colored Stetson, the polished boots and the linen-laced holster, was colder, much colder, than that of the other. And he knew that he'd been right—that Buck Brady alone had cleaned the slate for the Brady name.

But in the years thereafter, no one saw anything wrong in old Ma Williams placing a bunch of flowers regularly on the graves, nor in fact that the bunch on the grave of Carl Brady was slightly larger than either of the others.

SEÑOR SIDEWINDER

By WALT COBURN

Water! Water! Water! Deputy Marshal Tom Lowry would have given ten years of his life for a drink . . . but he was willing to pay death's own tally to pin the snake-sign on the treacherous, coiling Lopez.

DEPUTY Marshal Tom Lowry's lips moved but the sound that came forth was a hoarse, inarticulate croak. When a man has lain in the hot sun for three days without food or water, things happen to his voice. It may have been a curse that came from his cracked, sun-swollen lips. Perhaps it was a prayer. It is doubtful whether Tom himself knew, for his brain danced in cadence to the heat waves that rose from the glaring stretch of yellow sand between him and the shack two hundred yards ahead.

He lay behind the bloated carcass of his dead horse, bloodshot eyes fixed on the closed door of the cabin, waiting. Waiting for a glimpse of Señor Flat Nose Lopez. Flat Nose who was short of ammunition but had water and food in the shack.

Water! Tom Lowry would have given much for a drink of water. The outlaw knew this and had called taunts through the closed door. That was the Apache in Flat Nose that called those gibes. Mixed blood is usually bad blood down on the Arizona border. Had Flat Nose been a white man, he would have respected the marshal's superb grit. Instead, he would sometimes open the door, careful to stand well to one side, and throw buckets full of the precious liquid out onto the sand.

"Have a drink, Lowry!" he would shout. "Come on in and have one. I got a well plumb chock full uh it, here in the shack. Best water betwixt here an' Sonora."

This would draw a shot from Lowry's hot-barrelled carbine. Flat Nose would laugh and pull the door closed with the rope fastened to the latch.

If Lowry had taken advantage of the dark, that first night, and started on foot along the back trail to Agua Caliente, he could have made it. He had deliberately chosen to stay behind his dead horse and fight it out with the outlaw.

Six months before, Flat Nose had ambushed Bill Lowry, Tom's younger brother, and shot him in the back. Still fresh in Tom's mind was the memory of that cold-blooded murder and he had chosen to stay. Now, on the third day of that sun-blistered torture, the determination to kill the 'breed was in no manner lessened. It was the one thing that kept the law officer from going mad.

To be sure, he had a bench warrant for this outlaw. Flat Nose was badly wanted on various charges that ranged from horse stealing to train robbery and murder. But Tom had forgotten that. He remembered but one thing. The killing of Bill.

The sun struck the litter of empty shells on the sand and the reflected rays blinded Tom. With his boot, he covered the shells with sand and cackled foolishly. The blazing, golden ball that was the sun hung midway between the East and West skylines. The outlines of the cabin wobbled in the heat waves. A gray lizard, crawling toward the meager shade of the dead horse, halted. Tom saw its tiny jaws gaping as it panted. It's hot when a sand lizard pants like that. Unendurably hot. Tom's tongue, black and swollen, felt like blotting paper between his teeth.

Something moved in the cabin beyond the dancing heat waves. The 'breed had swung open the door and was throwing water outside. That would make the waves worse. Tom lined his sights on the open doorway and his thumb pulled back the hammer.

From inside the cabin, a rifle cracked flatly. Flat Nose's bullet ripped through

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the saddle cantle, a bare three inches from Tom Lowry's cheek.

Tom's carbine flashed in reply and the shot went wild. Sun and lack of sleep had undermined the officer's vision. A hoarse, mocking laugh came from inside the cabin.

"Come dark," Tom nodded to himself, as he dropped behind his barricade, "come night, I'll rush him. Moon last night.

"Have a drink, Lowry! Best water betwixt here an' Sonora."

Moon, night afore that. She'll come up later to-night. If I kin hold out till dark, I'll rush 'im."

THE stench of the dead horse was nauseating. Overhead, five buzzards circled, then as the smoke from Tom's carbine thinned and vanished, the birds

settled to sit nearby. Flat Nose was again throwing water out through the doorway and cursing at the tortured officer.

The outlaw's coarse voice grated on Lowry's taut nerves. Each word felt like a blow inside Tom's splitting head. Goaded to frenzy, Tom swung his carbine across the dead horse and fired without aiming. A yelp of pain from inside the cabin cleared Tom's brain for the moment. The water throwing had ceased and Tom thought he heard the half-breed groan.

Followed minutes of silent waiting. Dragging minutes that lengthened into hours. No sign of life came from the cabin. Tom Lowry, visioning that well inside the cabin, fought back the desire to quit his shelter and run toward it. Flat Nose Lopez dead? Or was it a trick. A devilish, inhuman Apache trick? Tears of anger welled to Tom's swollen eyes and made crooked courses through the yellow dust that coated his gaunt, unshaven cheeks. Dry, husky sobs tore his parched throat. The sun stood two hours below the center of the sky. Six hours or more until sundown. Six eternities.

At last the fit of sobbing passed. He fell to laughing. Flat Nose was wounded. Dead perhaps with a well full of water within reach. Water's no good to a dead man. Funny. Funny as hell. Tom laughed until the tears came. Then he quit rocking back and forth and nodded sagely to himself.

Removing his hat, he put it on the end of his carbine and bit by bit, shoved it into view across the rump of the dead horse. He nodded solemnly as no shot came from the cabin. He did not know that he had shoved his decoy too far and that the gleaming gun barrel showed beneath the hat.

"Dead," he croaked. "Dead as—as—" He pondered several seconds, racking his tortured brain for an appropriate simile. It nettled him beyond measure that he could not fit an apt comparison to the condition of the outlaw's deadness. In the act of rising and going to the cabin, he sank back, shaking his head ponderously as he flayed his wits for a word that would fit the dead outlaw.

"Dead as—dead as—"

It became a chant. A croaking ghastly chant.

"Dead as a sidewinder!" He shouted, and staggered to his feet.

A crimson streak of flame from the doorway. The flat report of a 30-30. Tom Lowry dropped in his track behind the dead horse. Sprawled face downward, he lay motionless. A sluggish red stream widened and spread across the sand under his left shoulder.

In the cabin, Flat Nose Lopez lay on his stomach and watched the smoke from his rifle barrel thin into nothing.

"Got him," he leered. "Got him with my last ca'tridge." Then he dragged himself across the room and crawled on a bunk.

Behind him lay a red trail of blood left by the hole in his thigh where Tom Lowry's chance bullet lodged against the thigh bone.

Now began an operation that would have been impossible for one less tough than the half-breed Apache. Ripping the leg of his overalls, he probed for the bullet with a butcher knife.

His dark face went yellow with suffering. Drawn, white-lipped, he gritted his teeth and gouged at the leaden slug. Sometimes he dropped back on the blood-soaked blankets, faint and sick. Then he would go at it again.

OUT under a cloudless, merciless sky, Tom Lowry hung to the thread of life. The shock of the thudding bullet had passed and his bloodshot eyes had come open to gaze stupidly at the buzzards that had settled almost within arm's reach. Moving feebly, he stuffed a soiled handkerchief into the wound in his shoulder and sat up.

"He wasn't dead. Damn him, he wasn't dead," sobbed Tom. "I gotta wait—till dark."

Then he realized that it *was* dark. That was queer. But a moment before the sun had been high in the sky. Now it was dark. He pulled a grimy, blood-soaked hand across his eyes. Then he looked about to see if the buzzards were still waiting. He wanted to tell them that they might as well fly away. It was dark and he was going into that shack to kill Flat Nose because the 'breed had killed his brother. But it was too dark to see the buzzards. A grey-black dark.

Tom Lowry had gone sun-blind! It was two hours until sun down!

Lying on his bunk, sick with pain, Flat Nose gulped water and cursed his hands because they shook. Then his beady black eyes narrowed and his right hand let go the butcher knife to grab the .45 that lay on the bunk.

Framed in the doorway stood Tom Lowry, a wobbling six-shooter clutched in his hand.

"I got yuh, Flat Nose!" he croaked.

Click! The hammer of the 'breed's .45 fell on an empty shell. With a curse of rage he threw the empty gun aside and reached for the knife.

Spat! Crash! Tom Lowry, blind as a bat at mid-day, was emptying his gun into the room.

"The damn fool's blind!" muttered Lopez, and lay flat on the bunk until Tom's gun was empty and the hammer fell on an empty shell. A look of cunning came into his black eyes. He knew that Lowry was delirious with suffering. No use to waste strength in a hand-to-hand fight. He waited until the marshal's knees buckled under him and grinned wickedly as Tom fell full length on the floor.

Then he left his bunk and threw what water was left into the officer's face.

IT was sundown when Tom awoke The outlaw was holding a dipper of water to his lips. After a time he could see and knew that he lay on the floor and that his hands and feet were tied. The 'breed's beady black eyes were boring into his. Flat Nose was talking.

"Thirsty, ain't yuh? Thirsty as hell. Well, yuh git water a-plenty if yuh do as I say. I got a hunk uh lead in my leg. Git it out, savvy, an' I give yuh water. Plenty uh water. Want it?"

He held the dipper where Tom could see the water. The officer's lips moved soundlessly.

"Is it a go?" repeated the 'breed, his face drawn with pain.

Tom nodded. The water trickled down his dry throat. The cool deliciousness of it was paradise itself. Slowly, he rallied. An hour passed. Then the 'breed freed his hands and handed him the knife. Flat Nose was holding the officer's gun and Tom felt the hard muzzle gouge his ribs.

"One bad move, Lowry," threatened the outlaw, "and I pull the trigger. Now go after that bullet an' work fast."

"My eyes is givin' me hell," grunted Tom. "Can't see plain. Do my best. After I patch up the hole, I'm killin' yuh in fair fight, if yuh got guts enough tuh stand up an' scrap like a man. I do my killin' on the square, Injun."

"That's it, eh?" snarled the outlaw. "Square, eh? Well, lemme tell yuh, Lowry, yuh can't bluff me. Fair fight it is. When we git feelin' better. I do my killin' as it suits me. Fair when I feel like it, dirty when I feel in the humor. No man livin' kin call me yaller an' prove it. Git after that bullet, damn yuh!"

The .45 poked Tom under the ribs and he started work. Beads of sweat stood out on the 'breed's forehead but the twisted smile never left his thin lips. Not once did he cry out, although his suffering seemed beyond the limit of human endurance.

"That's the Injun of it," decided Tom, not without admiration. He fished out the slug and held it in the palm of his red-stained hand.

The gun jabbed him in the pit of the stomach.

"Drop the knife, Lowry," came the command.

"So yuh kin shoot me?"

"We're fightin' fair," snapped the 'breed. "Drop it. That's it. Now hold out yore hands while I 'cuff yuh. Then I'll patch up yore shoulder. Guts, eh? I'll show yuh."

He handcuffed Tom to the leg of the bunk and dressed his own and his prisoner's wound, not unskilfully. Then they drank more water and ate beans and chili and jerked beef. Tom felt his strength returning. The 'breed lay back on the bunk and inhaled great draughts of cigaret smoke.

"Tomorrow or next day or next week, we fight, eh, Lowry? *'Sta bueno.* And I'll sit in the doorway an' watch the buzzards fill their bellies. Then, when the bones are picked clean, I move on to Sonora. Here in this shack, I got money hid. I'll spend it down there, gringo. I'll fill my belly with wine while yo're

kickin' hot hunks in hell. Fight? I'll show you, *amigo.*"

Tom Lowry, grey eyes cold and emotionless, nodded briefly.

"We'll see. Mebby yuh'll git cold feet an' kill me where I lay."

He knew that if he could keep the 'breed thinking as he thought now, there was a fighting chance. He had gotten under the skin of this half-caste and touched on the pride of this man who boasted of his killings.

Thus did two men, one bad and black-hearted, the other open and honest, watch each other. Both brave, both with hatred in their souls for the other, neither asking nor expecting mercy at the end. While outside in the gathering dusk of the desert twilight, five buzzards fluttered about the dead horse and waited.

FOR many hours, utter exhaustion claimed the two. Despite the pain of their wounds, they slept like men dead. It was dusk of another day when Tom Lowry's eyes came open.

A few feet away, standing in a leaning posture against the table, Flat Nose eyed the marshal who lay handcuffed to the corner post of the bunk. The 'breed's face looked drawn and sinister in the half light. Bitter, unrelenting hatred glittered in his beady, coal-black eyes.

Then Tom saw the .45 in Flat Nose's hand and knew what had awakened him. The 'breed had tried to shoot him and the click of the hammer falling on an empty shell had awakened him.

"So," said Tom in a cold, emotionless tone, "yuh tried tuh shoot me while I slept? I knowed that when it come to a show-down, yuh'd lay down like a yaller dog. Yuh ain't got it in yuh to fight fair an' square. We ain't got a ca'tridge between us, Injun. You'll have tuh finish me with a knife. Have at it, yuh damned, yaller-hided coward! Come on an' finish me while I can't move. I'll show yuh how a white man dies!"

With a muttered curse, the 'breed threw the gun into a corner.

"There ain't grub fer two," he explained. "One of us has gotta go."

"Yuh lie, Injun. There's grub in this shack fer two months. Yuh jest ain't got it in yuh to play the game square."

"Ain't I?" Flat Nose's lips lifted in a snarl. "I'll show yuh!"

With a chair for a crutch, he moved toward the stove to start a meal. Tom, relief showing in his eyes, sank back. He had looked at death and the sight had left him a bit shaken. The 'breed had tried to kill him as he slept. Black murder, like a festering sore, tainted the heart of Flat Nose and it would be no easy task to keep him from doing his killing after the fashion of his forefathers. The man had no honor, no sense of fair play. Only by ridicule could his murdering instinct be dampened. Tom Lowry's game was a desperate one. He dared not taunt the half-breed too far. The man would be on him like a beast, cutting him to ribbons with his knife.

"I could git the meals a heap quicker an' easier than you kin," he told Flat Nose. "Likewise, if yuh move around on that laig, the hole'll open up an' bleed. Blood p'izen gits a man sudden."

The beady black eyes shot him a swift glance of suspicion. Leaning against the chair, Flat Nose turned this statement over in his warped mind.

"Mmm. Yore wound's a clean un, Lowry. Damn scratch. Me, I'm hurt bad. What's tuh keep yuh from jumpin' me an' finishin' me if I uncuff yuh?"

"Not a damn thing, except one," grinned Tom. "That one thing is this. I fight like a man. I'm gonna kill yuh, shore enough. But I'm goin' tuh do it like a man."

The 'breed's face darkened with hot anger. He lurched forward a pace, then halted, staring fixedly into Lowry's level eyes. Then, with a growl, he turned back to the stove.

His wound broke open and the blood was staining the leg of his overalls, yet he kept on. He had the fire built now and had dumped half a can of coffee into the blackened pot. His face was growing gray with suffering and loss of blood. Finally, panting as if from a hard run, he sank weakly into the chair he had been using for a crutch. Wiping the beads of sweat from his forehead, he cursed the white man in a monotone, calling him every foul name he could think of. Sometimes he spat toward the man who lay fastened to the bunk. Tom

Lowry, a trifle white about the lips, made no reply. Always, he held the 'breed's eyes in a cold, fixed stare. The shadows of twilight thickened in the corners of the shack.

After a time, the 'breed lit a candle and went on with the supper. When dizziness swept over him, he sat down. When it had passed, he would hobble about once more, grim-lipped and silent.

Tom, watching, began timing the intervals between the resting periods. This he did by counting slowly. Those intertervals were shorter now, shorter by half than when he had begun the timing process. Flat Nose was getting rapidly weaker. A matter of minutes until the 'breed would no longer be able to move about. He wondered what went on in that pain-tortured mind.

"LOWRY," said Flat Nose, huskily, as if in reply to Tom's unspoken question, "I'm gittin' weaker. Yo're layin' there, gittin' stronger. I reckon I'm gonna kill yuh purty quick while I got strength."

"Scared, eh?" sneered Tom.

"No. Not scared, Lowry. You shot me. I might be gittin' that blood p'izen yuh spoke of. Afore it gits me, I'm gonna git you, that's all. If I'm cashin' in, I'm takin' you tuh hell with me. *Sabe?*"

"Yes," said Tom slowly, "I sabe. Yuh won't trust me tuh git supper?"

"No. If I had a ca'tridge. One ca'tridge, Lowry, I would. I could lay back on the bunk an' make you do the work. One ca'tridge. But I ain't got it."

"No," replied Tom thoughtfully. "Yuh ain't."

He watched the 'breed put more wood in the fire. In the yellow light of the blaze that came from the stove, Flat Nose's eyes looked like twin spots of black glass. Tom shifted his position until his manacled hands touched the pocket of his shirt. His fingers probed the pocket and came out with a .45 cartridge.

"Here," he called, holding the thing between his fingers. "Here yuh go, Injun. Swap yuh one shell fer the key to these 'cuffs."

"Where'd yuh git it?" cried Flat Nose hoarsely, lurching forward to claim it.

"Had it all the time. Knowin' how yuh treated pris'ners, I saved it, out yonder, figgerin' that if the fight went yore way, I'd use it on myself. I went funny in the head, otherwise I wouldn't be here."

The 'breed retrieved the six-shooter from the corner and ejecting the empty shells, shoved the one cartridge into the chamber of the cylinder. Then he made his way to the bunk.

"Here, Lowry." Grinning twistedly, he tossed the prisoner the key to the handcuffs.

Tom freed himself and rose. Without a word or so much as a glance at the half-breed, he set about getting supper. Save for a stiffness in his left shoulder, he felt fairly good. The fact that he was no longer tied hand and foot, gave him renewed courage. Flat Nose had the advantage, to be sure. If he so chose, he could kill the white man any time.

The well, or spring, was in the center of the room, boxed in with rough-hewn boards. A pail hung on a length of rawhide rope was the means of drawing water from the shallow hole that was some ten feet below the level of the dirt floor.

Tom lowered the pail, then drew it up, a third full. Puzzled, he tried again. The pail came up half full of muddy water.

Tom pondered this as he poured a cupfull of water into the black pot to settle the coffee.

The well, fed by some subterranean spring, was going dry! Should he tell the 'breed? Even now, Flat Nose had poured a generous amount of the precious liquid from the other pail into a bin basin and was washing his hands and face, keeping an eye on the white man the while.

What would Flat Nose do if he knew that the water was giving out? The answer was simple. He would, without hesitation, kill the white man to thus conserve the meager supply of life-nourishing liquid. No, he would not tell Flat Nose that only a few quarts at the most remained in the well. He placed food on the table and shoved it against the bunk.

They ate in silence, wolfing their food like animals for both men were ravenous. Cup after cup of steaming coffee passed down their throats. Then they smoked.

Tom stacked the dishes, making no move to wash them.

"Wash them dishes, Lowry," growled the 'breed, his hand on the gun.

Tom rose with a shrug of resignation. That precious water to be wasted in that manner? He half turned, then seeing the cold glitter in the Apache's eyes, obeyed the command.

"How long yuh bin holin' up at this shack, Flat Nose?" asked Tom presently when he had seated himself again. "I thought you was over in the White Mountains. Plumb took me by su'prise when yuh shot my hoss from under me out yonder. Thought some miner lived here, workin' a dry-wash claim back in the hills."

The 'breed nodded. "The White Mountains is my stompin' ground. Hoss broke a leg on me an' I hoofed it here. Found the place deserted. Grub a-plenty, water a-plenty, an' the bones of a man a layin' outside the door. There was a note on the table. Damn fool had wrote that the water had give out an' he was dyin' uh thirst. He musta bin loco."

Flat Nose laughed harshly. Tom grinned faintly. He understod now about the well. He had seen water holes go dry like that, for no reason that man understood. Then, as mysteriously as they had died, spring to life once more. The desert sand covered more than a few bleached bones of men who had traveled miles to find their water hole dried up. He was thinking of the many pails of water that the 'breed had wasted. It filled him with a cold rage that made him long to throttle the life from this murderer.

A dark red flush was mounting to the 'breed's lean cheeks. The beady black eyes were growing brighter.

"Hot in here, Lowry," he growled, and ripped open the neckband of his shirt. "Hot as hell, ain't it?"

"Shore is," lied Tom quickly. In reality, it had grown quite cool with the coming of darkness. He watched the 'breed closely. The moving about the cabin had done its damage. Flat Nose was burning with fever.

"Gimme some water, Lowry. A lot of it."

Tom handed him a dipper full. The 'breed spilled half of it in his eagerness to gulp it down.

"More," he grunted, thrusting the empty dipper into Tom's hand.

"I wouldn't take on too much if I was you," cautioned Tom. "Yuh got a touch uh fever an' it might make it wuss."

"Water, damn yuh!" snarled the half-breed.

Tom shoved the pail toward him and handed him the dipper.

"Drink yore head off, hombre. It's yore funeral."

"Shore is. Now shove yore arms around the leg uh the bunk, I'm gonna hobble yuh for the night."

He picked up the handcuffs and key that Tom had dropped on the bunk.

For a moment Tom tensed, ready to spring at the man on the bunk.

"Feel lucky, Lowry?" sneered the 'breed and cocked the gun. "Come on. It'll please me a heap tuh gut shoot yuh. Have at it!"

The blue barrel was steady as a rock, its black muzzle covering the officer. Tom saw the futility of resistance. Inwardly raging, outwardly cool and unruffled, he grinned into the half-breed's face and squatting on the floor, shoved his hands, one on either side of the bunk leg, and watched the steel manacles click about his wrists.

"Sleep hearty, Lowry," leered the half-breed, and lit a cigaret.

Tom made himself as comfortable as his cramped position permitted, but did not sleep. He watched Flat Nose light a fresh candle and place it on the table beside the bunk.

From the distant hills came the long-drawn howl of a wolf.

THE feeble yellow candle flame guttered and flared up. Flat Nose Lopez, smoking innumerable cigarets, littered the floor with butts. The fever was drying the perspiration as fast as it showed on his face. His black eyes were two spots of burning red light. He had thrown the blankets to the foot of the bunk and lay there, looking at the ugly wound in his leg.

He had removed the bandage because the rapid swelling had tightened it until it cut into the flesh. Rage added to his fever. Blind, unreasoning rage that ate into his vitality like strong acid. The words stumbling from his dry lips, he cursed Tom Lowry in deadly monotone

that sent a shiver down the spine of the white man.

"Damn yuh! Damn yuh, Lowry. You done this. Directly, when I feel cooler, I'm gonna come down there on the floor where yo're layin'. I'm gonna start a whittlin' on yuh Lowry, with a dull knife. I'm gonna cut notches in yore carcass an' listen to yuh beg fer mercy. I let that damn houndin' brother uh yourn off too easy. I'll take his share out on you. Yuh called me Injun. I'm aimin' tuh show yuh how my Injun blood is braver'n yore white blood, Lowry. I'm sufferin' hell here. But I ain't yellin'. White blood is weak blood an' I'll prove it. I'll have yuh whinin' like a whipped dog. A whipped dog, Lowry."

He drank heavily from the pail of water, then threw the bucket down. Tom saw a good two quarts trickle across the floor. Water enough to last a man two days and this crazed murderer had thrown it away.

The 'breed sank back on the bunk, cursing. Tom gave his attention to the leg of the bunk. It was a thick post, six inches in diameter, buried deep in the hard-packed, dirt floor. Spikes fastened its top to the ridge log of the cabin. To break or uproot it was sheer impossibility. The steel handcuffs bit into Tom's wrists as he strained to free his hands. The effort opened the wound in his shoulder and he felt a warm trickle of blood coursing slowly down his chest. He felt the beginning of what would soon be a torturing thirst.

Then the 'breed lurched from the bunk and slumped into the chair. Grinning evilly, Flat Nose drew the butcher knife from his waistband and ran a thumb along the blade. The light of insanity glittered in his beady eyes.

Tom's glance flitted to the gun in the waistband of the 'breed's overalls, then away again before Flat Nose could read the meaning of the glance. Let the 'breed come within reach and Tom might have a chance to secure the weapon with his manacled hands.

"Thirsty," muttered the 'breed, and with the aid of the chair, moved painfully across the room to the well. Tom watched with bated breath.

Flat Nose lowered the pail, jiggled the rope, then drew up the bucket, hand over hand. Horror flashed in his eyes as he saw the scant amount of muddy water in the bottom of the pail. With a sobbing curse, he again lowered the bucket. Once more it came up almost empty.

"You did this!" shrieked the 'breed crazily. "You! Dried up the well some way! It's gone dry! Dry as a bone! And me burnin' up inside!"

Frantically he lowered the bucket, again and again, drinking the contents, mud and all. His Apache fortitude had, for the time being, deserted him and tears of unreasoning rage coursed unchecked across his flushed cheeks. He had fallen from the chair and sat on the floor now, his back against the boxlike structure that surrounded the well. Muddy water drooled from the corners of his mouth as he drank from the bucket. The muddy liquid slaked his burning thirst and he became more quiet. He seemed to be fighting to regain his self-control.

A sudden, grating laugh burst from his lips. He looked at the white man, cruel calculation in his stare.

"I got fever, ain't I? Bad fever. The water's give out. I'm weak as hell right now. Can't hold out much longer. Purty soon I'll go clean loco. An' I won't be able tuh enjoy seein' yuh die. I think, Lowry, that I'll gut shoot yuh now. Then I'll set here an' watch yuh suffer with me. I'd a heap ruther cut on yuh some but I'm gittin' weak an' I need my strength. It's a long crawl tuh where you are. A long crawl. An' I'm weak. Yuh might even git the knife away from me or kick me. Yuh kin still kick with yore feet. So I reckon I won't take chances, gringo. I'll plug yuh from here an' then sit back an' enjoy the show till I cash in."

HE took the gun in both hands and cocked it. Tom Lowry watched him carefully. Yes, the 'breed's hands were steady enough. That slug would hit its mark. For the fraction of a second. Tom's eyes left the 'breed's face. There was a tiny, half hidden bit of metal on the floor near the bunk, just beyond the prisoner's reach. Tom knew it was beyond reach, for he had tried to get it while Flat Nose was drawing the mucky water from the well. This little bit of

metal was the key to the handcuffs, dropped as Flat Nose lurched from the bunk. Given time, Tom felt sure he could shift his position and with his feet, move the key close enough to reach it with his hands. Already he had it planned just how he would crook his leg to reach the key with the toe of his boot.

Click-click! Flat Nose had cocked the .45 and the long barrel rose steadily.

"Better save that ca'tridge, Injun," said Tom, steeling his nerves to make his voice sound matter-of-fact.

"Why?" sneered Flat Nose, eyes like pin points of red fire.

"A man suffers hard when he dies uh thirst, Flat Nose. Plumb hard. That well's gone dry. Me 'n' you is done for. If I was you I'd save that ca'tridge till the sufferin' got bad, then blow my brains out."

For an instant, the 'breed hesitated, lowering the heavy gun till it rested on his knee. Tom shifted his position and holding the outlaw's eyes with his steady gaze, touched the key with his boot. On pretense of bettering his position, he moved his legs and a swift glance told him that the key now lay within easy reach of his hands. Hope surged in his heart.

"Yuh'll shore regret it bad if yuh waste that shell on me, Flat Nose. When yore tongue swells up like a hunk uh black 'dobe in yore mouth, yuh'll cuss yoreself fer wastin' that shell on me. I'll be alive because it takes a long time fer a man like me tuh die. I'll plumb enjoy watchin' yuh weaken at the end and beg like a baby fer water. Yuh'll see things. Devilish things. Faces uh dead men an' lakes full uh water that's jest mirages. Yuh'll crawl out there on the hot sand because yuh'll think yuh see water across the desert. Yuh mind that miner yuh found dead outside? He went thataway, Flat Nose. That's how come he was layin' out yonder instead uh here on his bunk. He seen a mirage through the door and started crawlin' to it. Crawlin' on his belly like a damn lizard. But there wa'n't no water. Only a mirage across yonder, put there by the devil tuh make yuh crawl out in the open where the buzzards'll pick yore bones. There was five of 'em out there yesterday, Injun. There'll be more by mornin'. An' yuh'll see 'em settin' there *waitin'. Waitin'.* Buzzards is patient thataway, Flat Nose. I'll be in here where the sun don't burn holes in my hide, watchin' through the doorway. Sufferin' some but knowin' that yo're gittin' yore needin's, Injun. You killed Bill. I aimed tuh kill you. But the cards don't lay thataway. The thirst an' the sun is takin' the dirty job offen my hands. Gut shoot me an' I'll live tuh see yuh go out hard an' sufferin' bad. If that bullet goes high, which mebbyso it will because I'm layin' here in a awkward position, it'll hit my heart an' I'll die peaceful, knowin' that yo're left behind tuh die slow an' die alone. You'll weaken, Injun, if there's nobody tuh watch yuh die. You'll weaken an' it'll be all the harder. Yeah, if I was in yore place, I'd save that bullet."

Flat Nose nodded grimly, and, letting the hammer down softly, lay the gun aside.

"Looks like I'd have tuh whittle on yuh after all," he croaked, lips spread in a crooked grin.

Moving on all fours, the knife between his teeth, he started crawling toward Tom.

Then Tom's foot shot out. His spur hooked the leg of the table and jerked it suddenly, upsetting the candle and plunging the room into inky darkness. At the same instant Tom's hand closed over the little key.

A shriek of rage tore from the 'breed's lips as he threw himself on the white man. Thud! The knife shot downward, striking the post that supported the bunk and breaking off the blade close to the hilt.

To Tom, working frantically in the dark, it seemed hours before he fitted the key in the lock and unsnapped the handcuffs. The 'breed was striking wildly with the broken knife. The jagged blade was slashing at Tom's neck and shoulders, bringing blood each time.

With a grunt of relief that was a prayer to his Maker, Tom swung his arms free of the post and struck at the outlaw's face with the steel manacles. They clashed with sickening force into the 'breed's face.

Clawing, biting, striking, they fought like beasts, silent save for their labored breathing. Then Flat Nose's head struck the bunk post and he went limp.

Tom lit the candle and, after much labor, got Flat Nose on the bunk and handcuffed one wrist to the post. Then he gulped

down some cold coffee, that was left in the pot. The well, he discovered, yielded nothing but slimy mud. He picked up the gun that held the one precious cartridge.

"If it comes to the worst," he decided, and laid it on the shelf.

On the bunk, Flat Nose Lopez moved feebly and opened his eyes.

"Lowry!" he croaked feebly.

"Yeah?"

"You — won. I'm goin' — out. Ain't got it comin', I know—but will yuh pull my boots off?"

Tom nodded and removed one boot. The other, on the wounded leg, was too tight. The foot inside had swollen.

"Cut it — Lowry. Don't want tuh go with my boots on. Cut it off."

Tom did so. Flat Nose nodded his thanks.

"Yo're a man, Lowry. Brave. Best man I ever knowed. Good luck. It's in the cards. You'll come out winner. Me, I'm no good. Can't even die game. Boots is off, ain't they?"

"Yes."

"Both of 'em?"

"Both of 'em."

"Then—adios, white man."

A tremor shook his body. The beady eyes glazed. Flat Nose Lopez was dead.

TOM straightened from the bunk. His eyes went from the face of the dead man to the gun on the shelf. Already the terrible fever of thirst was creeping over him. On unsteady legs he crossed the room and took the gun in his hand.

"There's jest one thing," he muttered, spinning the cylinder until the cartridge came under the lifted hammer. "Jest one thing that I ain't never tried. It's plumb late but I'm tryin' it now—"

Slowly Tom Lowry sank to his knees, head bowed in prayer.

Not a star shone outside. A faint breeze stirred, died, and came again. A tiny drop of water fell on the roof. Then, with a rush, the storm came.

With a great cry, Tom threw the gun from him into the night.

"Rain! Thank th' Lord! Rain!" he shouted, and staggered outside.

Black wings beating the dark, the waiting buzzards took wing.

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Trail of the Tumbleweed

A Rangeland Novelet

By JOHN STARR

Guns talked too loud in the Utah country, so bushwhackers used whispering steel—until a Kansas waddy dulled their blades with the honest bite of .45 lead!

THE dark cowboy downed his drink and slapped a coin on the bar. He turned slowly, gazing around the quiet room. Across from him four men sat at a table with cards and chips. Farther down the bar an old man stood, curiously tense, watching him, even as they all had watched since he entered.

The cowboy cleared his throat: "I been led to believe that this hole in the ground is Canyon City. Am I right, gentlemen?"

The men at the poker table turned to stare at him, but none answered. It was the old man who spoke, his voice strong and commanding, untouched by age.

"This is Canyon City, Mister, state of Utah, and that happened to be the Three Fingers River that you left up the trail a spell." His faded blue eyes were still chill despite the years reflected in his shriveled body, and their cold glance moved slowly now from the thin, swarthy face of the strange puncher to the lone gun swinging comfortably from a lean middle. "Ain't lost, are yuh?"

"No, I ain't lost." The stranger's voice rustled in the quiet room. "Canyon City, huh? I've heard she's plenty fast on the trigger."

"She mostly wears her holsters tied down," the old man said tartly. "I reckon that does shave a second off a man's draw. Just one question, Mister, 'fore we go any further. You got a purty dark skin, but that ain't nothin' ag'in you—'less you're from Kansas. There's one combination I can't stand, and that's a dark-skinned gent a-wearin' a Kansas brand."

A stack of chips toppled over at the poker table, and the clatter of their falling was like the rattle of hail. The thin lids of the stranger were motionless above cool black eyes.

"And what if I am from Kansas?"

The old man drew closer and a rigid tenseness gripped his body. "I thought so," he said thickly, like one that was seeing a ghost. The tremor in his voice was not from anger, it was more the reflection of a terrific inner disturbance. But anger was not long in coming to his assistance. "I thought so," he repeated, and this time his voice was not thick, there was no tremor. "Yo're old Thunder Kirby's nephew! And yuh set foot in my house and drink my whisky. Get out 'fore I call my son to kill yuh and throw yuh out fer coyote bait."

Cold lights shimmered in the stranger's eyes. "Ain't you some hasty?"

"Yo're a Kirby—a Kirby is poison to the stomach of a Varney!"

A smile the depth of a sheet of paper touched the stranger's lips. "You must be Loose Varney."

"Get outa my saloon 'fore I call up them stairs for Marve Varney to burn yuh down."

"That's twice you've mentioned killin', Varney." The cowboy was slow to continue, and the one quick step the old man took toward the door leading up the back stairs did not hasten him. "I didn't know this was your saloon," he said at last. "And I'm not a Kirby."

The chill eyes of Loose Varney gleamed bright. "Not a Kirby, with that black skin of yours, and a-talkin' through your teeth like gents from Kansas do?" His shriveled body suddenly started forward and he stabbed out a thin finger. "Ain't that a 'K' burned into the gun belt yo're a-wearin'?"

The slim, muscled fingers of the stranger's left hand strayed to an initial burned into a round piece of leather, and sewed to the belt encircling his waist. "That's a K," he said, "and it stands for Kirby. I took this belt off the body of the best friend I ever had—Grant Kirby. Sometimes he was called Kansas Kirby."

The words had no depth, and yet they

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Summers pulled the body of Evens to the side of the road and swung to the back of his sorrel. . . .

lingered. The stranger leaned back against the scarred bar and let his eyes travel over the other faces in the room. Glances shifted, and hands that had been idle suddenly toyed with stacks of poker chips.

"He was robbed," the stranger continued. "Killed in cold blood, and robbed."

The blue lips of the old man formed a question. "Who are you?"

"I'm a friend of Grant Kirby's."

Each breath Loose Varney drew was cut short, as though a knife blade was lodged in his chest. The tremor crept back into his voice. "Did yuh git the man that killed him?" He whispered the question, but every man in the room heard.

The stranger shook his head, thin amber lids low and motionless. "Not yet," he answered.

Cords swelled under the wrinkled skin on Varney's neck, and the hand he reached out for a steadying glass of whisky shook some of the liquid to the floor before he could lift it to his lips. "Killed," he whispered to himself. "Robbed. . . . ."

THE whisky helped old Varney pull together. His chill eyes searched the face of the stranger for a measuring second, and a steely gray light flickered in their depths. He walked toward a room at the back of the saloon and jerked his thumb for the friend of Grant Kirby to follow. When they were inside, he closed the door and turned the key.

"Yuh know about the map and the gold," he jerked out. "Yuh know or yuh wouldn't be here. Somebody killed young Kirby fer the map. The question is—who's got it?"

"That's the question," the stranger said dryly. *"Who?"*

Loose Varney began a restless pacing. "Gold!" he whispered, and laughed. The sound prickled like the laugh of an insane person. "Yuh wanta know who killed Grant Kirby?" he asked suddenly. He held up one yellow, skinny finger in the face of the stranger. "I'll tell yuh. Old Thunder sent a man to kill his nephew and steal that map—and the man he sent on that job, he'd have to trust more'n his mother. There's only one livin' person for the job—that's his son Verd! He's a snake that ain't fit company fer a rattler, cuz he don't give no warnin' 'fore he strikes. He gets yuh from behind, like his dad. They're two of a kind, him and Thunder."

The old man was trembling violently now, but the voice that had not been touched by age still hummed like a saw cutting through timber.

"You ain't got no proof for what you're sayin', except your hate for the Kirbys, Varney," the stranger said softly. "Why couldn't old Thunder a-waited until his nephew arrived, if he'd wanted to kill him?"

Loose Varney threw back his head and laughed, not loud, but still shrill enough to tingle up and down the spine of a listener. "There is a lot of things yuh don't know, stranger—things that happened twenty-five year ago. Listen! Four of us, Old Thunder, young he was then, his brother Grant, Laughin' Bill Stewart, and myself found a mountain of gold. We was in a wild part of hell where none of us had ever been before, so we drew a map, cut it in fours with Thunder's jackknife, and started back for a town. Not a one of us suspicioned the other," he cackled, "or so three of us thought. Poor 'Laughin' Bill gets a blade between his galluses the first night in town, and his map was never found. Them's things yuh don't know, stranger. They happened twenty-five year ago. Well, after the killin', Grant Kirby, Thunder's brother, he just curls up inside and won't open his lips. He knew Thunder had that missin' map. Grant couldn't stand it, stranger, so he run away."

Loose Varney jammed his hands into his pockets to hide their trembling. "He run away to save his life—he knew his brother was goin' to kill him for his map!" The old man could not hold back another cackle. "Wasn't that rich? Twenty-five-year-old Thunder's been cheated outa that gold."

The stranger nodded. "Grant's father never told him about this map till he was on his death bed. Fact is, he was so far gone when he began mumblin' about it, that Grant thought he was just kinda fancyin' things. That's why he wrote to the Utah Kirby's 'fore he started—didn't want to come clean out here on a wild-goose chase."

The old man shook his head. "He'd

a-better kept silent as the grave — he'd a been alive today if he had." Then a new thought struck the old man. He leaned forward and half whispered, "How was this young Kirby killed? Twenty-five year ago we found Laughin' Bill with a knife wound in his back."

The thin features of the stranger were as set as granite. "Grant was stabbed in the back," he answered.

"Like father, like son," Varney croaked. "Years don't change the breed. Gold put Thunder Kirby ravin' mad — burned out what little good there was in him." His voice sank to a charged whisper. "And stranger, there's gold, tons of it, a whole mountain of it." He held up a shaking finger and traced a course on the wall. "It runs like that, the gulch where it lays. Crooked like a snake. Funny how everything connected with gold is crooked."

Then he grew sober, almost sad. "One night, in this room, on the very board yo're a-standin' on — the one with the bullet hole—I told Thunder Kirby he stabbed Laughin' Bill Stewart. I told him to his teeth, stranger, and there's been Kirbys and there's been Varneys killed since that night. And think, Mister, the four of us —Thunder, Grant and Laughin' Bill and me—usta hell around together. Now he's killed them all but me. Just old Loose Varney a-standin' between him and a mountain of gold!"

His voice faded to silence. The trembling had gripped him again. He grasped a chair and let himself down. "I get plumb gone when I talk about it. I guess maybe I've took a lot of yore time with things that happened twenty-five year ago, but it don't seem like that long to me. Seems like yesterday me and the boys carried Laughin' Bill away — that surprised look on his gray face." The old man mopped a dampness from his forehead with a shirt sleeve.

"Did you say Verd Kirby had been away?" the stranger asked.

"Yes. Reckon he got home last night. He was off to see about leasin' more range, though the Kirbys has range to throw at the birds." The old man cackled. "Verd's a mean one, black as the ace of spades, and he can snake a knife outa his boot top as rapid as he can jump a gun offen his hip. He's a mean one. If your innards ain't well lined with steel, stranger, you better not draw cards. There's been men a-plenty killed already over them four maps." His chill eyes held the gray lights that had flashed in their depths once before.

"I figure to set in the game," the stranger answered. "Summers is my name, Crow Summers — remember that, Varney, Crow Summers. I've come to collect a third of that gold."

THE high, shrill laugh of Loose Varney followed Crow Summers as he walked through the front room of the saloon and onto the street. It prickled up and down the spine like the lonesome call of a panther. Summers shivered under its echo, and without thought, his right hand brushed closer to the low, comfortable gun. "Hearin' I was aimin' to collect a third of that gold didn't set well with the old man," he thought. "I reckon Thunder Kirby ain't the only enemy I got in this fight. I reckon the Varneys are goin' to be plenty tough to chew—plenty tough."

He paused to deliberate a few paces from the door. Did an eating place lie up or down the street? As he squinted into the purpling evening, a man came briskly down the street. As the fellow passed, he bestowed upon Crow Summers a hot, scornful glance. His black eyes passed out insults that included the Varney Saloon and all who lingered near it.

Crow lifted one eyebrow after his stiff back, and drew a quick conclusion: "Black enough for a Kirby, and it seems somethin' in this neighborhood don't smell good to him. I'm givin' the odds, that the stomach of a Kirby can't stand a Varney, no more'n the Varney stomachs can stand a Kirby."

He lifted his dusty hat back from a black wing of hair, and breathed deeply of the cool air that was settling with a heavy moistness in the bottom of the canyon. He shook his head as he moved along the well-worn path crowding the few buildings.

"When fate squares away and takes a wallop at a gent, that wallop is purty sure to be a haymaker. Take poor old Grant. Got his, over a fourth of a map that was handed to his dad twenty-five years ago. Yes, sir, got his, and here I am shufflin' the cowhides along the street of a strange

town, bent on collectin' a third of the gold for his sister Nell, who I ain't never seen. By rights, Grant wasn't alive when I reached him, but he wouldn't die until I'd give him promise to fight for Nell Kirby. He died peaceful, and here I am shufflin' the old cowhides on new range.

"Loose Varney is positive that Old Thunder sent his son to kill Grant, but that gold a-layin' up there in that crooked gulch has done funny things to Varney same as it has to Old Thunder. I ain't a-sayin' one way or the other, but I am a-promisin' myself that before the smoke has all rolled away I'll know who knifed Grant Kirby in the back. Then it'll be him or me."

His black eyes shifted restlessly. "Grant had one drink too many that night, and he mighta talked. There was tough men in that saloon, in that little Idaho town. Tough enough to knife a man over a whisper of gold. Tough enough to ride into Canyon City and try and collect the gold. . . . But Laughin' Bill was found with a knife in his back and a surprised look on his face. There's the old saw about history repeatin' herself. Somethin' to be ironed out, same as you work the crimps outa a wall-eyed mustang on a frosty mornin'."

The steady *tap, tap,* of a lightly falling hammer drew Crow from his thoughts. He was approaching an old shack where a lamp was already lighted, and the sound was coming through the doorway. He looked in, and paused to watch an old man at work among long, clean pine boards. The sickly, flickering light made odd shadows dance on the wall and floor, and the tap of the slim hammer was like softly falling drumsticks.

Crow was interested in the old man's face, for it was lined and cross-lined with hard living. Not always had he worked among clean, smooth boards in an old shack where nests of shadows clung to every corner. There was knowledge, knowledge that might even take in twenty-five years ago, seamed into his leathery face.

"Howdy, Dad. Keepin' late hours, ain't you?"

The old man did not pause or look up. "Howdy, Stranger."

Crow stepped inside. "Business purty rushin', huh?"

"Business is always rushin' with a coffin maker in Canyon City. Be you that Kirby from Kansas that writ Old Thunder he was comin'? That son of his brother Grant?"

"Nope."

"Ain't you, now?" The old man laid down his hammer and looked up. "You talk like you might be from Kansas—kinda draggy, as if you was on your last pegs. I thought you was him when you rode into town on that leg-weary sorrel. Ike Ware, the barnman, thought so, too. We kinda snickered up our sleeves when we saw you high heelin' it into Varney's."

He grinned, waiting for Crow to speak.

"Varney thought the same thing. He come near havin' his son pitch me to the coyotes. I rocked him back on his heels when I told him Grant Kirby had been murdered."

"Set down over there on that coffin, Stranger. Murdered, you say? That'll be a blow to Old Thunder. He's countin' big on findin' that gold, since the lost map was heard from." The coffin-maker's eyes sharpened. "Was he robbed?"

Crow Summers nodded.

The hammer clattered to the floor. "That's bad business. This town has been half Varney, half Kirby, for twenty-five years, with ever' now and then a cloud of smoke and a death march. Loose Varney and his kit swear Old Thunder has Laughin' Bill's fourth of a map. This killin', and another map gone South, won't help feelin's. Reckon it will mean a flurry of business for me, seein' I make coffins for both sides."

He looked Crow Summers over. "I ain't got any boards long enough for you—might be some in on the next load from the mill, though."

Crow smiled. "Don't make my box up in advance, Dad, 'cause you might be stuck with it. Seein' we're purty good friends, who'd you say had that fourth of a map that once belonged to Laughin' Bill?"

"Better men than me has speculated on that question, and either the Varneys got them comin', or the Kirbys got them goin'. Anyway, they was all got. I keep my mouth shut and make coffins for both sides."

Crow rose. "Not a bad idea, Dad. I'll be limpin' along."

The old man was ahead of him to the door. He looked up and down the now dusky street. He listened. Then he spoke hurriedly, and in a half whisper, "Don't trust neither side, Stranger, and keep a slick eye peeled, or I'll be sendin' out for them long boards. Wherever Laughin' Bill's map is, there's another one to the side of it now."

"Thanks, Dad. I'll keep my weather eye open, and play a lone hand."

"A lone hand, trustin' nobody," the old man cautioned softly. "Loose Varney is a cacklin' old buzzard, shakin' with the palsy, but they's fight in him yet, and Old Thunder can still sling a knife with the best of 'em. The young blood is chips off the old blocks."

II

IT was shortly after twelve o'clock, noon, as Crow Summers rode up a draw that emptied him at the rear of an old barn squatting like a huge bat with spread wings. The sound of his approach was swallowed by the drowsy shuffling of a few horses in two flanking corrals. A strong-looking, weather-beaten house was lumped against the faded sky, a hundred or so yards to the left. Other buildings reared and sprawled here and there. A smoke-house pierced the still air like a needle, and an old blacksmith-shop barely lifted its roof to clear a man's head. Hundreds of Kirby acres lay to all sides of this hub.

When a carelessly loud voice carried to him, Crow Summers paused, hoping to gather an idea of what lay ahead of him around the corner of the old barn.

"I like the scrap in them black eyes of yours, though you outa he shinin' up to me for bein' willin' to fight your battles," a man's voice said.

A woman answered, and her tones were not unpleasant, although they were sharpened with anger, "I'll fight my own battles."

The man chuckled. "You wouldn't last for one good long breath against Thunder Kirby and his cat-footin' son. Your only hope is to stick to me. Trust me, Redlips, and soon you'll be wearin' white diamonds to match the black ones in your eyes."

"I don't want your help — but I believe you have something that belongs to me. I want that."

The man laughed. "How'd you like a slice off the moon and a few stars? Don't back away from me, I won't bite little girls, even when they are bad."

"Take your hands off my wrist — or I'll call my cousin."

This brought another laugh. "Your cousin can't afford to quarrel with me. Neither can you. Cut out the show stuff and get some sense into your empty head. I ain't long on patience, and I don't spend no time beggin'."

There followed the sound of rapidly shuffling feet. Then a gasp from the woman.

Crow Summers slid from his saddle, flexed his right elbow, and made sure the gun at his waist was free and easy. There had been that in the voice of the unseen man, that suggested a lion at play.

Stepping quickly around the corner of the barn, Crow saw a black-haired girl weaving from side to side, in an effort to free her shoulders from a man who gripped them. His was a blond head, gleaming like ripe wheat in the sun.

Crow cleared his throat softly. Not much of a sound, but the blond man heard. He hurled the girl two running steps, and swung about, crouched over two heavy holsters. His gleaming eyes met Crow's and held. A current of hate passed between them. They were enemies on the instant—enemies to the death. The snarl boiling in the man's chest simmered into words.

"Who's payin' you to sneak-foot around? You ain't wanted here—get movin'."

A smile touched Crow's pinched lips. "I'm lookin' for the K.B."

"Stranger, huh, and figured to do one of them Samaritan acts. Well, get movin' —back track." The last word was pushed against closed teeth, and his big hands ceased their gentle swinging.

Crow's answer was a curling of the fingers of his right hand. The big man saw, and into his hard eyes there crept the respect that one gunman pays another. And this respect bred caution. The blaze of anger died down, and was replaced by a chill cunning.

"Are you movin' on?" he asked.

"Not on your say-so. I understood the K.B. was owned by the Kirbys and I'm here to see Old Thunder, personal. I'm stayin' until I see him."

"And I say you're goin'."

The girl took a step forward and faced the big blond man.

"You can't give orders on this ranch."

Crow Summers answered her, without relaxing for one instant, his battle of eyes and nerves. "I ain't takin' orders except-in' from a Kirby, ma'am, and they don't come with sandy hair and red skins. Would you mind findin' Thunder Kirby and tellin' him there's a no-good cow-puncher here to see him."

"I won't leave this spot," the girl replied slowly. Then she spoke again to the big man. "How dare you force this man to fight or leave? You are a stranger on the K.B. yourself."

Something in the lean, hard face of Crow Summers had told his enemy that he was not going to wear down under silent threats. The big man straightened from his crouch, a short laugh on his sun-dried lips: "Our trails might cross again, cowboy, and when they do, I'm prayin' they won't be a woman handy to chip in for you."

The pinched smile again touched Crow's mouth. "That's one way of savin' your face, I reckon. I'll be waitin' for them trails to cross."

FOR all his bulk, the man moved up the path with smooth grace, his hands swinging at his sides like two perfectly timed pendulums. The girl shuddered.

Crow met her worried glance. "I reckon I've made things worse for you by hornin' in," he said.

"No—no, I want to thank you. But you've made a mean enemy, I'm sorry for that. Right now he is much in favor with my uncle. I'm Nell Kirby."

There was a certain twang to some of her words that stirred up memories for the cowboy, memories of a dark-eyed friend who had rolled his vowels and finished them off with a little drag. "You are Nell Kirby? Not Grant Kirby's sister, I guess—she's in Casper, Kansas."

"I used to be in Casper—yes, I'm Grant's sister. You knew him?" Sadness hinged on the question, and Crow wondered if midnight were ever as dark and velvety as the girl's eyes.

"Yes'm, I knew him."

Tears sprang in glistening drops to her lashes. "He's dead," she said. "Grant is dead."

Crow nodded. "Yes'm," and wondered how she knew. That letter he had sent from Idaho to Kansas had not reached here. How did she know?

"Where did you know my brother?"

"In Wyoming, on the Big Horn. We punched Circle J cows together. We holed up in the same line camp one winter. My name is Cr—Bert Summers."

She smiled. "You are Crow Summers—Grant told me lots about you. Most of his letters were about you." A tear glistened on her cheek as she held out her hand. "We can be friends, too, can't we?"

Crow Summers grinned.

Their hands met, and there was surprising strength in the slim, brown fingers that gripped his. "You're like someone Grant has sent me when he couldn't come himself. That man you drove away knew my brother, too. He was with him when he died—buried him."

The lean face of the cowboy sharpened. "Buried Grant, you say?" he asked softly.

There passed before him a sun-parched graveyard on a hillside, where hungry sage and knee-high bunchgrass crowded close upon the long, thin mounds. He saw it in the early morning before the sun had routed the last sting of daybreak. The sheriff had helped him lift the pine box from the buckboard, and the doctor had read from a backless bible. The old doctor had waved aside all thanks for his early morning efforts, and the sheriff had insisted shortly that the loan of the buckboard wasn't nothing. The officer had squinted into the rising sun.

"Wisht I'd been in town when this killin' happened. Mighta got a lead to work on. You say your friend just ambled out to see how the horses was beddin' down for the night, and you heard men yell and begin runnin'? No shots, you're sure? Pockets stripped of letters, nothin' else? The only name he mumbled was his sister's?"

The girl was gazing into space, and did not note the sharpening of her companion's features. She nodded. "Yes, buried him

in a little Idaho town on the Snake River. But even knowing that—I don't trust him. I'm grateful—but his eyes are like yellow agates. They chill me. Bob Evens is his name, and I'm sorry you've made him your enemy. I'm sorry, but I thank you, Crow Summers."

"Don't let it worry you. Any time a man goes through this life without a few smackin' good enemies, he ain't worth his salt."

The glow that had come to her cheeks as she thanked him suddenly ebbed. Her hands crept to her bosom and clenched until the shapely nails were milky white. Her eyes fastened on the belt at his waist.

Crow's fingers strayed to that old black gun belt. "I'm sorry, Miss Nell, I never thought about meetin' you."

Her eyes were big and questioning. "I —I don't understand. Grant would never part with that belt while he was alive— it was part of him."

Heavy steps came whanging down the hard-beaten trail leading from house to barn, and the man and woman looked up. Bob Evens was returning, but not alone.

"That's Old Thunder with him," the girl whispered.

Crow Summers whistled for his horse, and the big sorrel poked his nose around the corner of the barn, head well to the side to free his feet of the dragging reins. "Like to have the big boy handy," he said to the girl.

Fear flashed to the girl's eyes. "Do you expect trouble?"

"No'm. Still, Evens has the inside track with your uncle. Don't shake like that, please. And remember this — go right on mistrustin' Bob Evens. First chance we get to talk, I'll tell you how I come by Grant's gun belt. You're right about it bein' a part of him—he even slept with it."

The girl stepped a pace away as the two men pushed up.

THUNDER KIRBY was a man past sixty, with piercing eyes, and stern, bluish lips. Gray hair bristled on his head. but had no softening effect on his hard face.

He braced himself firmly on spread feet and growled at the stranger on his ranch.

"You wanta see Thunder Kirby, personal, so's I'm told. What's your business?"

Crow looked beyond him to the watchful face of Evens. The big man was taking a desperate chance, staking everything on being able to force a quarrel between Old Thunder and himself. For Crow believed that Bob Evens had killed Grant Kirby, and was here on the K.B. to dicker over the gold. His only hope lay in driving Crow Summers from the ranch. Evens met his eyes with a taunt.

Crow spoke evenly to Old Thunder. "I'd like to see you alone."

"If you're lookin' for a job, save your breath. I ain't got no grain to throw away on critters like that sorrel — better weather-board him 'fore winter sets in."

Crow's answer was a pinched smile. "He's kinda gaunt, but I reckon he'll stand the winter. He's busted a good many miles in the last few days. He's come all the way from a little sun-blistered town on the Snake. I'm referrin' to Rocky Pass, where Grant Kirby was killed."

Old Thunder's body came forward like an animal ready to leap. The big man edged an inch closer in, and his smooth, square-fingered hands came to rest. Unlike as an African lion and a slinky catamount, were Bob Evens and Crow Summers, yet each man was a power unto himself. Those square fingers of the big man would hold an automatic with the steadiness of granite, and his bunching muscles would be as nerveless as cords of ivory.

Nell Kirby drew in a short, sobbing breath.

Old Thunder swung on her. "Git fer the house, Nell. This ain't no place for you."

"I have the right to hear anything that is said of Grant."

"Git, I say!"

Nell Kirby turned slowly and walked away. She glanced over her shoulder, then stepped behind an old pine a foot from the trail.

"Rocky Pass, you say?" Thunder Kirby asked of Crow Summers. "Where Grant was killed?" His words were a challenge. His piercing eyes had singled out the lonesome ease of that low-hung gun, and the perfect accord of the right hand. "And what are you here for?"

"On a promise I made to Grant when

he was more dead than alive. A promise I'm goin' through with in spite of the man a-standin' at your side. Kirby, it was the son of your own brother that was stabbed in the back in Rocky Pass — your own blood. Wouldn't you like to lay hands on the man that done it?"

Old Thunder's rumble drowned out the lingering whisper of Crow's words. "Don't mention the name of my brother to me! I'd a strangled him with my own hands these last twenty-five years if I coulda laid hold of him. They wasn't a drop of real Kirby blood in his whole carcass. But what you got to say—I'll listen."

Crow looked into the black, stormy face, and onto the man, Bob Evens. It had been a mistake to mention to Old Thunder the brother who had kept him from piles of yellow gold for twenty-five years. The taunting light in the big man's eyes had grown; a smile now pulled at his sun-dried lips.

But there was another approach, another way to batter through the guard of this sixty-year-old warrior. Crow would try the mention of the map.

"If you ain't interested in gettin' the man who killed Grant Kirby, maybe you'd be interested in keepin' him from collectin' on that map he took offen Grant's body? Maybe you'd be interested in that, Thunder Kirby."

The old man licked his dry lips, and the greed in his eyes flamed like a torch touched by a wind. He growled like an animal, and swayed from side to side on his wide-spread feet. Before he could bring out words, in answer to Crow Summers, a horseman cantered around the corner of the old barn. The newcomer swept in the tense scene, and flung to the ground.

"What's the row, Pap?" he snapped. "Looks like hell's fire and gunsmoke is about ready to roll."

"This stranger just come from Rocky Pass, Verd. The town where your cousin was knifed in the back." The old man laughed. "You'd think Grant Kirby was somebody real prime, the way certain gents are a-wearin' down horseflesh a-gettin' here to tell of his passin'."

Verd Kirby took a long look at Crow Summers, and his black, insulting eyes sent a chill warning curling up the cowboy's spine. This was the man who had passed him in front of Varney's saloon the evening before. But young Kirby gave no indication of that meeting.

"From Rocky Pass, huh? And what does he want?"

"Wants to tell us Grant was robbed of a map, and that the man who killed him is tryin' to collect gold."

Verd Kirby nodded.

"Pap, this is another Varney scheme. I saw this gent last night a-hangin' around with them snakes. They've hatched up some lies to try and find out where the map is."

"Hangin' around with Loose Varney! And he comes here to bargain! He ain't fit to live — he ain't fit to breathe K.B. air."

Verd Kirby's gun hand twitched.

The hard voice of Bob Evens broke in. "Don't make a play for that smoke-stick, Verd. You ain't fast enough. This gent is good, and I pick 'em close. "I'll gun him myself when the time is ripe. We might need him yet."

"There's no time like the minute, Evens," Crow Summers invited, in a cool voice. "I'm after the man that killed Grant Kirby, and sooner or later, I'll get him."

The big man smiled, not a muscle moving. "The time ain't ripe."

Crow turned to Old Thunder. "I saw Varney, yes, and I told him what I'm now tellin' you. I'm fightin' for the rights of Grant Kirby, the rights that now go to his sister. I'm here for a third of that gold."

No one of the three moved or spoke. In dead silence Crow Summers backed toward his horse.

III

CROW SUMMERS rode slowly on his way back to Canyon City. He let the sorrel drink deeply at one brush-fringed creek, and rested him for a half hour before swinging over to the main road.

So the man who had killed Grant Kirby and robbed him was being taken in at the K.B. without any questions? It was the map Old Thunder wanted; he was not interested in the murderer of his nephew. And Nell Kirby would fare poorly, indeed,

at the hands of the three men he had just left.

"When the time is ripe," the words kept returning to the cowboy. Why had Bob Evens held back from a fight? Why had he not tried to silence his enemy for good and all? Fear had not had a part in the play, for, whatever else he was, the blond man was not a coward.

"He ain't afraid of man or the devil," Crow said half aloud, squinting into the dust between the sorrel's ears. "He's got some use for me, that's why he didn't pick me off this noon — that's why he didn't *try*."

The swarthy, anger-flushed face of Verd Kirby returned to the cowboy, and the long, twitching fingers that had seemed more adapted to a knife than a gun. It was easy to connect young Kirby with a slim, glittering blade, but Bob Evens—no. Evens had none of the earmarks of a knife thrower, and yet it was Evens who had come down from Rocky Pass with the news of Grant Kirby's death. Those blunt, smooth fingers of Evens' were molded to support automatics. His big, nerveless body was created for toe-to-toe battles.

"He's a killer," Crow Summers announced to the jogging sorrel. "He'd as lief chisel a notch on his gun as eat a plate of beans, but he'd look the gent in the eye and smile, while he pulled the trigger. Knives—I just don't get the connection, old sorrel-top. Now, Verd Kirby, he might ease a blade into a man's back. But if he'd a-killed Grant, he'd have the map, and they'd be no room for Bob Evens in the picture."

Crow knew that Nell Kirby had been standing behind the pine during their talk, and he wondered if she would believe he was in with Loose Varney. Verd Kirby had been so certain, and Old Thunder had backed him up. Would they be able to turn her against him? A woman's instinct had warned her of Bob Evens, but would she be able to read as wisely where her own blood was concerned?

The sorrel shot one ear forward and lifted his head as though he was interested in what lay beyond the bend in the road. When the second ear pointed forward, Crow Summers straightened from his slouching seat and shifted his reins to the left hand. The sky was red with a setting sun and a little hush was in the air. Crow had ridden slowly on his return to Canyon City. Not once had he lifted the sorrel to a gallop.

"Yeah," he said softly to the animal. "I'm watchin'—you can go back to sleep."

He rode round the sharp bend onto Bob Evens, and from the way the sharp shoes of Evens' black had cut up the road, it was easy to see he had ben waiting quite some time. Crow met his straight look.

"Sorry I was late," Crow said. "If I'd a-known you was waitin', I'd a-kicked up."

"I'm goin' to kill you, Summers," the big man said slowly. "It didn't suit me to do the job while the Kirbys was lookin' on."

"I'd just as soon put on the show without a audience, myself, Evens."

"But I'm goin' to give you one chance to save your life."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. The big man's voice was heavy, as though each word carried a world of meaning. It was somehow like words chipped from granite. "I'm a better man than you, Summers. I'm honest with you, I'm tellin' you. I've killed better men than you. Since I been ten years old, my dad made me snake a .45, bigger'n me fifty times a day. Fifty times or I didn't get no supper. I ain't missed in five years, Summers—I won't miss now."

"There's a pair of gates a-swingin' open for one of us, Evens, but I don't feel no draught."

The big man chuckled. "I didn't 'low you'd crawl, Summers—I 'lowed you'd go out in smoke. Suits me." His tones took on an edge of eagerness. "How about a little side bet?"

"I'll back my gun-work with my last dime, mister, but I can't see no sense to the play. Who'll pay me after you've gone over the Jordan?"

" 'Tain't money I want offen you, Summers — I mean not cold cash. I wanta know where that map is that belonged to Grant Kirby. If you'll answer me that question—*straight*—I'll tell you who killed Kirby. Whoever comes outa this little scrap alive, will have some valuable information. That's fair to you and fair to me. Will you back that draw of yours to that fast a tune?"

The lean, brown face of Crow Summers gave out no information to the probing

eyes of the big man. He sat his horse easily, his right hand at rest, fingers gently curled.

So Bob Evens did not have the map! Grant Kirby had not had it in any of the letters that were taken off his body. Did Old Thunder know this, and had he sent this man sitting like a graven image on the powerful black horse? Or was Bob Evens bluffing the Kirbys?

And he would tell who killed Grant Kirby—he would laugh in the face of death and the devil, and tell the truth.

"I'm callin' you, Evens. I'll tell you all I know about the map; you tell me who killed Grant Kirby. I'm waitin'."

Bob Evens leaned forward in his saddle. "Waitin', huh? Waitin'! Well, here it is, right between the eyes. *I* killed Grant Kirby as he stepped into the stall of that geldin' he was so set on. I took every scrap of paper on him—but I was outsmarted." He laughed, his sun-parched lips drawing apart in a snarl. "Now, Summers, *where is that map?*"

"If I knew, I'd tell you, Evens, 'cause where you're goin' they won't be no gold. I thought you had the map—that's all, ain't it?"

Two guns roared, but there was only one echo. Two tiny wisps of smoke curled upward. For a second both men sat their saddles rigidly, then one groaned and pitched sideways. A big black horse reared and plunged back with dangling reins.

Crow Summers slid to earth and approached the big man crumpled in the road. He lifted him to a sitting position and Bob Evens opened his eyes. His sun-parched lips pulled to a smile.

"There's just one man down yonder where I'm headed for, that I'll be ashamed to look in the eye—that's Kirby. My stomach turned clean inside out when I shoved that knife in his back. It was the other gent's idea. 'No guns,' says he, 'guns bark—*knives whisper!*'"

THE lids half closed over the sandy eyes of Bob Evens, and he was dead. Crow Summers rose. There lay the man who had killed Grant Kirby. From down the road came the jingle of a freighter's bells. Some six or eight horse team making Canyon City for the night. He pulled the body of Evens to the side of the road and swung to the back of his sorrel. Then he dismounted and again approached the body, his black eyes keen with a sudden thought. Carefully he searched through pockets. They were mostly empty: a sack of smoking, a few odd matches.

Then his fingers touched what he sought—money—bills. He drew them forth. Crisp, new hundred-dollar bills, eight, nine, ten of them.

"He was bought," he whispered. "Bought to use a knife, 'cause knives only *whisper.*"

He pushed the money back to its former resting place, and brushed his fingers in the dust of the road to be free of the taint. Blood money. Money that had bought the death of Grant Kirby. . . .

It was some hours later when Crow Summers circled Canyon City and rode into the little town from the upper end. Night was spread like a sheltering blanket now, and surely the freighter had brought in the body of Bob Evens a good hour earlier. He left his sorrel at the barn and walked toward the hotel.

Where was the map? It had not been in any of Grant Kirby's belongings, for he had searched them every inch. He smiled into the darkness. The Kirbys would be after him now, they would think he had killed Evens for that scrap of paper twenty-five years old. What would Nell think? Would those velvety eyes of hers harden with doubt?

The *tap, tap,* of a lightly falling hammer gradually slipped in upon his thoughts. A yellow light was shining across the path a few steps ahead. Crow quickened his pace and stopped at the open door.

"How's business? Dad?"

The old man started, and his eyes slid cautiously to every corner of the room. "Jaspers, feller," he said under his breath, "I reckon the pot is boilin' over. Old Thunder and Verd and that niece from Kansas hit town late this evenin' all set to sign papers, or somethin', with a friend of the Kirby that was killed up in Idaho. Well, a freighter brung this friend in, toes up. I hopped over, expectin' to see you, and there it was a sandy, red-skinned gent. Evens, was his name, and Kirby ain't mincin' words over who killed him. I reckon you won't be popular in Canyon City."

"The Kirbys are in town, huh?"

"Yep. The girl, she stood up for you, kinda weak, but Verd he done pointed out how you'd killed her brother and then trailed Evens and killed him. She said her brother trusted you, and that fetched a laugh. Old Thunder 'lowed he'd trusted you too far, seein' there was gold a-glitterin'."

"Can't blame her for doubtin', can you, Dad?"

"Nope, things look bad. Howbeit, Old Thunder swears this Evens was a hell-tootin' gunner, and I noticed he wasn't got from behind. Loose Varney is a-rearin' too. He frothed at the mouth like a mad coyote when he found out Evens was in town to sell Kirby the map."

Crow Summers leaned against the wall of rough boards, and his lids descended in thought. "Dad," he said slowly, "you and me are friends, and friends are to be used. I want you to get word to Loose Varney that I have gone to the hotel to dicker with Old Thunder about the map."

"Jasper, feller!"

"I want Loose Varney and Old Thunder in the same room, Dad. You see it's this way: Bob Evens killed Grant Kirby—but he was hired to do the job. There is only two people who would be interested enough in that map to hire Grant Kirby killed. I'm gonna know which of the two it was."

"Don't forget the young blood—they're chips off the old blocks."

"Well you get word to Loose Varney, Dad?"

"Well, feller, seein' we're friends, I will, but I'm sayin' to you that them two old wardogs ain't been inside the same four walls together in many a moon. I reckon this means business for me."

IV

THE hotel clerk almost swallowed his pipe when he looked up into the lean face of Crow Summers. He rescued it, however, and clinched his teeth down to make sure it was safe. "Howdy—Somethin'?"

"Yes. What room has Thunder Kirby?"

The pipe bobbed. "Six. Up the steps and three doors down."

The stranger in Canyon City climbed up the half-lighted stairway with a slow stamp. The fixed stare of the clerk followed him, and the man's lips moved as though he were counting each measured footfall. His fascinated gaze did not waver until the lean, slow-moving figure disappeared. He jumped as though a gun had exploded when the street door again swung open. He beckoned the man who entered.

"The gent that done the killin' this afternoon is on his way up to talk to Old Thunder. The black eyes in his head was like coals of fire, and I never slapped my eye on a neater set-up. I dang near swallowed my pipe!"

The man blinked. "I reckon Verd would be interested to know his old man had a caller. Verd's purty drunk, but news like that might sober him up."

He winked at the clerk and went back to the street.

When Crow Summers reached the second floor he counted three doors, and then, by the light of the swinging hall lamp, he saw he was at number six. He rapped on the door.

The rumbling of heavy tones inside snapped off, then ordered: "Come in."

Crow pushed into the little room with a live, quick stride. Old Thunder Kirby sprang to meet him with a growl and a toss of his silver-crowned head.

"So it's you, Summers!"

Nell Kirby rose from a squeaky chair, and her startled glance swept his face. Her dark eyes were neither trusting nor accusing, and the hand she reached out for the foot of the iron bed trembled.

"Crow Summers," she said softly, "I'm glad you've come—there are so many things we don't understand."

"Understand!" the word was spat from the bluish lips of Old Thunder. "Understand! You bet your bottom dollar, we understand. We know that this ivory-lidded gent stabbed Grant Kirby in the back, and killed Bob Evens. He's got your map, Nell, and he's here to see how much we'll pay for it."

Crow leaned toward the old man. "Be careful what you say," he warned. "When Grant Kirby was stabbed in the back, it was just history repeatin' herself. Remember that, and be careful what you say."

Old Thunder fell back a step. "Are you meanin' Laughin' Bill?" he asked, and his voice tightened until it seemed like on

each word his tones would break. Then his anger burst loose afresh. "What do you know about twenty-five years ago? What do you know about Laughin' Bill?"

"I know that he was stabbed in the back, and that his map was gone when his friends found him. I know that a few days ago another man was stabbed in the back in a little town on the Snake River, and that he was supposed to be packin' a map to match the one that was taken off Laughin' Bill."

"You Varney spy! So you're accusin' me of killin' my own nephew?" The old man would have charged, but the hard eyes of his enemy warned him back. His big hands clenched at his sides in rage.

"I'm not accusin' you, Kirby, I'm sayin' the same hand that handled the knife twenty-five years ago is responsible for this last death. You're jumpin' at conclusions." The last words were low and silky, and they rocked the old man back like a blow to the chin.

Nell Kirby took advantage of the silence that suddenly enveloped her uncle. "What is all this talk about? Who is Laughing Bill, and why is his death connected with my brother's? Answer me, Crow Summers, surely you realize I have a right to know."

Crow met her gaze as squarely as he could and still be aware of every move made by Thunder Kirby. "You have a right to know, but there's a few crimps to be worked out first. I'm a-findin' out tonight, Miss Nell, who killed Laughin' Bill."

Old Thunder laughed. "Findin' out tonight, huh?"

"Yeah, I've sent for Loose Varney—him and you and me are goin' to put our cards on the table. Face up."

"Varney? Loose Varney? If he sets foot inside a room I'm payin' for, I'll cut him to pieces with my jackknife."

The words rumbled in his chest like thunder, and filled the small room. Perhaps the heavy tones deadened other sounds, soft sounds like the slow opening of the door at the cowboy's back. Too late Crow sensed his danger. As he weaved sidewise to take in this new threat, a clubbed gun fell on his temple. A dark face pushed close to his, and taunting words were on the hot, stumbling tongue.

"Gunman, huh? Figure you're too good to be took?"

Crow stumbled, trying to lift his leaden right arm. Another blow crashed on his head with the roar of a bursting dam. His knees slowly gave way. He heard a woman sobbing. Short, dry sobs. Then the voice of the man again.

"A lesson comin' to you, and Verd Kirby is the fella that's goin' to give it to you."

The last few words seemed to be floating in the air, didn't seem to come from any particular source. Even the heavy rumbling laugh didn't seem to be connected with Old Thunder Kirby. And the woman, she wasn't sobbing any more. Her voice was ringing out like sleigh bells on a clear, cold night. She was trying to keep the two men in the room from hitting someone who was down.

Then blackness.

CROW SUMMERS came slowly from the shadowy depths. His body was numb—his mind was numb; his head pained, and the little bell ringing inside his right ear didn't help matters. A woman's face, eyes black as midnight, floated before him. He tried to remember, and a sound that must have been a groan escaped his lips. This brought a man to his side.

"He's comin' out—we won't have to wait much longer."

"I can't breathe the air of this room much longer," snapped a thin, hard voice. "I ain't used to bein' housed with Kirbys."

This brought a growl of rage. "Nobody's keepin' you, Varney. I'd a sight rather see your back than your face."

The man bending over Crow swung about. "You two old fools keep still. You been yellin' about gold for twenty-five years, and now we got a chance to get the missin' map. We got to work together, no matter how much hate there is in the blood. Nothin' is going to stand between me and that gold!"

The words silenced the others in the room, silenced them except for a short cackling laugh.

Crow Summers lay still and gave no sign that he recognized that laugh. So Loose Varney had come—the coffin-maker had done his work well. And they were

waiting for him, Crow Summers, to tell them where the map was. What a surprise they were in for? He lay without a move, although pains were stabbing like sharp blades. Every second brought him a clearer head and a little more strength.

"Douse him with some water, Verd," snarled Old Thunder. "I can't set here all night a-lookin' at that ol' fox-face of a Varney. All the gold in the world ain't a-gonna keep me from tearin' him to atoms in another second!"

The cackling laugh of Loose Varney met the words. "Don't blame you for wantin' to kill me—I'm the only one left of the four."

"Shut up! Hear me, shut up!" Verd Kirby gave his full attention to the two old men.

Crow Summers opened his eyes. Took in the small room, Verd Kirby, Old Thunder and Loose Varney. Nell Kirby was sitting in the squeaky chair at the foot of the iron bed, and she saw his lids flutter. Her eyes were large and questioning and frightened.

That fear in her set face was like a dash of whisky to the man lying on the floor. His blood leaped in his veins, his mind began to click. What had she gone through since he had been off in that black tomb? What was she suffering now? She had protected him there at the last, he remembered that.

He sat up, and his moving figure brought the three men about him like wolves.

"How do you feel?" Verd Kirby snarled. "Still think you're such a hell-goer?" He laughed. "You ain't nothin' but a rat killer. You slip around and stab your friends in the back. Get up on your feet."

Crow Summers leaned back against the bed. "What happened?" he asked. His lids fell heavily over his dark eyes. "I'm weak—gimme a drink."

Verd Kirby laughed. "Ain't so gay as you was, are you? I'd see your tongue hangin' out 'fore I'd give you a drink."

But Thunder Kirby drew a flask and shoved it toward the cowboy. "Get his legs back under him so's he can talk, Verd. Clear the bats outa his head."

Neither of the men seemed to notice that although the cowboy's thin lids were low over his eyes, they did not flutter. He drank deeply from the flask, deeply and slowly. He handed the whisky back and began feeling of his right arm. "Numb as a chair leg," he muttered, and slowly pulled himself to his feet. He flexed the right arm gently. "Plumb numb," he repeated.

Verd Kirby pushed his head forward and drew a gun from the holster under his arm. "We ain't interested in how you feel, cowboy, what we wanta know is—where's that map you took offen Evens? Talk fast, 'cause you're in a tight place. Speak your little piece and maybe I'll let you live."

Crow's fingers strayed to his waist; the gunbelt of Grant Kirby's was gone. "So you want me to talk? Well, what if I don't want to talk? So long as I hold information that's valuable to you, you can't kill me."

His calmness brought the blood in angry surges to the neck of Old Thunder. "You'll talk," he rumbled. "Talk or die—I'm past wastin' time. No, stand back, Verd. I'll handle this."

Verd Kirby slunk back at the words. Old Thunder was still a driving power when he was thoroughly roused. "I'll kill you," he repeated to Crow Summers. "Kill you, and that gold can sleep on another twenty-five years. You stand right to my face and tell me I stabbed Laughin' Bill in the back and that I was responsible for my nephew's death. Not even for gold will I take words like them!"

The high laugh of Loose Varney cut into the second's lull. It was the prickling laugh that moved up and down a listener's spine like a blade. "Make him talk first, Kirby—remember there's a whole mountain of that gold. Remember that crooked gulch a-windin' down to the river, every inch of it paved with gold. Make him talk!"

The picture Varney drew of that crooked gulch brought beads of moisture to the knotted brow of Old Thunder. "But he won't talk—I know his breed. He'll die with a smile, but all hell won't draw any words outa him."

Loose Varney cackled. "Maybe yuh don't know how to handle him. Let old Loose Varney have a try at the fine bird. Gimme that jackknife in your pocket, Thunder—I'll cut him to ribbons while he's still breathin'." His voice was chill, and humming, no hint of age, and yet a trembling had set up in his old muscles.

Crow's dark eyes shifted to his face. "That sounds bad comin' from a white man, Varney."

Varney nodded and reached a hand for the knife. "I'll tell you what I'm gonna do. I ain't gonna cut you to ribbons—white men don't do things like that—but I'm gonna cut the cords in your right arm. Ever see a hand where the cords had been cut?"

Crow Summers watched him throw open the blade of the knife. He straightened slowly to a better balance and the pinched smile hovered about his lips. "You're goin' through with the deal, Varney, I can see it in your eyes. I'll talk."

V

OLD THUNDER weaved back, relief on his black face, for that gleaming blade in Varney's hand had affected him strangely. Verd Kirby sneered at the cowboy's lack of nerve; he had wanted to see the play go through. The gun in his hand sagged a bit and his eyes flashed with greed.

"Go ahead and talk, Summers!"

Crow turned to Nell Kirby. She was standing beside her chair, face as white as new snow.

"So you turned against me, did you, Miss Kirby?" the cowboy asked. "You're goin' to be sorry—I was your friend. I was the man that found your brother after he had been stabbed in the back. I bent over him and listened to his last words. They was of you. Askin' me to fight for your rights. I promised him I would, and I come to Canyon City to keep that promise. And what thanks do I get? You side in with these men who say I killed Grant."

Nell Kirby shrank back against the wall. "I said I didn't understand, Crow Summers—I didn't say—"

The cowboy laughed. "You let these men turn you against me, and you'll be sorry. I'm goin' to tell them where your map is and you'll have to go back to Kansas to clerkin' in a store."

Her eyes flashed. "I'll take that map, Crow Summers—tell me where it is. It belongs to me."

Verd Kirby laughed. "Hear that, Pap?"

The hand of Old Thunder fell on the shoulder of his niece. "Git on to your own room, Nell. This ain't no deal for a woman to mix into."

The words and tones drew fire from the girl. "If this man tells where my map is, I intend to hear it."

"Better git to your room," Verd Kirby put in. "Won't do you no good to get high and mighty with the old man."

Nell looked from the sullen face of her cousin to the stormy one of her uncle. "That map belongs to me—now that Grant is gone," she said. "I'm going to have it."

"Listen," Old Thunder barked. "Your brother had a map and he lost it—that means you lost it. Do you think Verd and me is goin' to fight for a map and then have a woman step in and claim it?"

"What a man fights for is his," Verd snapped. "Pack your duds and go back to Kansas."

The girl stood without a move. "You mean you are going to rob me?"

"Git to your room," ordered Old Thunder.

Crow Summers shook his head. "You shoulda stuck by me, Miss Kirby. But there is one thing I guess your uncle will let you have and that's Grant's gunbelt. He thought a heap of it and he wanted you to have it." He leaned forward as he spoke and looked straight into the girl's eyes. "It's over there in the corner."

He nodded his head toward it.

Her eyes widened; then her lids quickly cloaked them. She walked to the corner and picked up the belt. She hardly seemed to have the strength to lift the heavy .45 that weighed down the holster.

Crow laughed. "That gun belongs to me. I don't 'low you'll want it, Miss Kirby—throw it on the washstand."

Nell Kirby slipped the .45 from its sheath, but she still held it in her hands. As her eyes traveled slowly over the faces of the men in the room, the trembling that had seized her a few moments before left. She spoke to her uncle and cousin:

"I guess it's only fair that you have the thing you've fought for. After all, it was my father who kept you from the gold all these years. I know you'll send me some money, I guess I'll have to be satisfied."

"Now you're talkin' sane, Nell," Verd

growled. "Sure we'll send you some money."

"Git on to your room." The command came from Old Thunder, but his voice was not so harsh as when he had issued the command a short time before.

"I'm going," the girl said, "but first I want to say a few words to the man who claims he was a friend of my brother's." She turned to Crow Summers. "You came to me with lies, and Grant had trusted you. Lies!"

She took a step forward, two steps.

Loose Varney cackled. "I didn't come here to listen to women handin' out tongue lashin's. I come to hear of gold!"

"Let her tell him a few things," Verd Kirby muttered. "She'll know after this that she better stick to a Kirby."

"I'm glad the gold isn't falling into your hands," the girl said to Summers in her low, tense voice. "You intended to rob me!"

She pushed up beside Old Thunder—then a step ahead.

"Rob me!" The two words were sharp and stinging. The heavy automatic was now hugged close in to her waist. She was grasping it by the gleaming barrel.

The cowboy braced himself against the lashing words. He swayed to a better balance and seemed to forget his weakness. Then he leaped. The hand of the girl shot out, and the room was plunged into gunfire.

VERD KIRBY lurched and the gun clattered from his hand. He glared with unbelieving eyes at the lean figure of Summers, at the weapon in his hand.

The three were covered.

"Don't move, not even an eyelash!" Crow Summers gave the order. "Don't try to pick up that gun, Thunder. Drop that jackknife, Varney. You fellows are dancin' to my music from now on."

Old Thunder turned on his niece, and anger shook him like a chill. "A traitor to your own blood!"

She answered in a low voice: "Grant trusted Crow Summers, and I am doing the same. I learned soon enough that my uncle and cousin had no love for the daughter of the man who had run away twenty-five years ago."

"Line up," Crow ordered, and waited for them to comply. "Now I'm gonna talk to you, the three men who I figure know the most about the death of Grant Kirby. Along with promisin' Grant to fight for his sister, I made a promise to myself—it was to get the gent who knifed as good a man as ever walked in shoe leather. Well, I got Bob Evens. I got him, but when he was dyin' he told me he was hired to stab Grant Kirby. So I got another man yet."

Loose Varney cackled.

Old Thunder rumbled, "That's a lie—Evens wasn't no knife slinger!"

Crow Summers watched them both closely, and he watched the sullen face of Verd Kirby. "Evens was hired. You're right, Thunder, he wasn't a knife slinger, but the man that paid him the money had the say." He leaned forward. "That man paid him in crisp new bills; I reckon them hundreds musta hissed kinda soft as they changed hands. I reckon Evens held out for a little extra, 'cause he didn't like knifes, and slippin' up to men's backs. But that killin' had to be done a certain way—the silent way. Guns make a lot of noise, and the man that hired Evens didn't want noise. He wanted it done smooth, like when Laughin' Bill was killed."

The face of Old Thunder purpled. "Still harpin' on Laughin' Bill, ain't you?"

Loose Varney's shrill laughter rose again.

"Can't paint this picture without Laughin' Bill," Crow said. "The man that killed him was too old for his last job. His body was shrunken by the passing of years; and his nerves was jumpy from layin' awake nights a-seein' again the gray surprised face of Laughin' Bill."

Varney began to tremble. "Poor ol' Laughin' Bill—a pard. Remember him, Thunder, when he come runnin' to tell us he'd found gold in that crooked gulch?"

"Shut up!"

Verd Kirby cursed the cackling old man, but his words dwindled away as he felt the hard stare of Summers.

Crow shook his head from side to side. "It ain't no use to shut Varney up. The time has come for words. Twenty-five years ago, four men drew a map, quartered it with a jackknife, and swore friend-

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ship. But a short time later one man was killed for his fourth of that map—stabbed from behind."

"There was others mighta known of them maps save us four," Old Thunder snarled. "We'd celebrated purty fancy the evenin' Laughin' Bill was st—killed. Whisky makes a fool outa lots of wise men."

Loose Varney jammed his hands in his pockets to hide their trembling. Moisture gathered on his brow, and he seemed to try to hold back the words that tumbled from his lips. "Twenty-five years ago and I can still see that knife a-stickin' in Laughin' Bill's back!"

"A week ago," Crow Summers said in a low, even voice, "another man was stabbed in the back. Bob Evens done the job. But he was hired—hired by a man whose muscles was too old for the work, hired by a man who had laid awake nights for twenty-five years a-thinkin' of Laughin' Bill."

Old Thunder twitched and his eyes grew wild. "Don't," he said. "'Tain't no use now—happened too long ago."

"But this last man," Crow Summers urged grimly, "it ain't too late to get *his* murderer. The man that hired Bob Evens wouldn't hear to a gun bein' used. Guns made noise—knives didn't."

Loose Varney nodded, his eyes still fastened on the cowboy's face as though he were unable to tear his glance away. Old Thunder licked his bluish lips. He fought against the spell of the young man swaying before him, beating home words in an even, toneless voice. He fought against the question in the steady eyes. His muscles bunched like an animal ready to spring as the cowboy took up his story.

"Knives don't make noise—they're silent. Ain't that true?"

Old Thunder's face was like a stone wall, but slowly he nodded as Summers leaned toward him.

"Ain't it true, Varney?" the cowboy asked softly. "Ain't it true that knives are safe 'cause they don't make any noise?"

A thin, piercing laugh rose to Loose Varney's lips. "Yeah," he answered half under his breath. "Knives don't make no noise—they—they *whisper.*" He laughed again.

Crow Summers leaned closer. "That's right, Varney—and that's the very words you said to Bob Evens when you hired him to kill Grant Kirby. You wouldn't let him use a gun, it would make too much noise—and you had another reason, Varney. You wanted to pin the murder onto Thunder Kirby, same as you had that other one twenty-five years ago."

Loose Varney jerked his trembling hands from his pockets to ward off the words of the man looking into his face.

"You paid him in new bills, new hundred dollar bills."

LOOSE VARNEY leaped back. "I didn't do it! I didn't do it! That gold done it, that gold a-waitin' for me in the crooked gulch!" He laughed wildly. "Evens wanted another thousand to turn over the map!"

Thunder Kirby roared like a mad bull and lunged toward the twitching body of Loose Varney. "You?" he bellowed. "You?" Then his anger choked him.

Crow Summers met his plunge with an iron shoulder and tossed him back. Thunder Kirby leaned a second against the wall, breathing like a winded horse, his big hands clenching. "And all these years I been under the curse of stabbin' a man in the back—twenty-five years. It's turned every mouthful of food into gall! Even my own son saddled me with that murder!"

Verd Kirby's eyes enlarged and then seemed to shrink. "Never thought you done it, pap," he muttered, but he was talking into his collar. There was no force back of the words.

"My own son brandin' me," Old Thunder repeated. "No wonder I ain't been fit fer man ner beast." He pushed toward the cowering Varney again, but Crow held him back.

"The gold done it!" Loose Varney whispered. "The gold. There was too much of it!"

"I reckon you better get the sheriff, Verd," Crow said.

"THAT was a bad hour for you Miss Nell," Crow Summers said, as he and the dark-eyed girl sat on the aged sofa in the parlor of the hotel.

She stroked the worn gun belt that lay across her knees. "It was a bad hour for you, too, Crow Summers. I would have lost everything if Grant had not sent you to me."

He shook his head glumly. "I'm not such a good partner. Remember I haven't found the map yet."

"But we are partners, aren't we? We're going fifty-fifty on this gold, aren't we?"

His lean face sobered. "Let's not give any thought to wages, Miss Nell."

"But this is a partnership—let's shake hands on it. Fifty-fifty on every dollar. Won't you take my hand."

"But, Miss Nell—"

"And when are you going to drop that 'Miss'?"

He drew a deep breath and clasped her strong, brown hand in his. "Thanks, Nell," he said softly. "I knew from the way Grant always talked about you, that I'd like you."

She nodded. "And Grant always told me I'd like you." She looked down at the old belt in her lap and placed one finger on the letter "K" burned into a round piece of leather and sewed fast. "Our map," she said slowly, "is under that little piece of leather. Grant and I hid it there before he left Kansas for Utah."

She pointed to the cunningly-contrived pocket.

"And I never give it a thought!" Crow Summers pressed the hand he still held, and his voice was deep with satisfaction. "There won't be no more trouble." He smiled. "I'm afraid you can't even find use for me."

"Do you think I could trust my map with Thunder Kirby and Verd?"

"You certainly couldn't," he replied quickly, and in his earnestness he failed to catch the gleam in the girl's eyes.

"Maybe I could hire someone to take my map and go with the others back into this wild country and bring out my share of the gold." She made the statement thoughtfully, and smiled at the worry that sprang to his face.

"You can't do that," he said firmly. "I'll look after that map for you."

"Of course you will," she said softly. "We've already snook on it, haven't we, partner?"

BOOTHILL TALLY

By J. T. WELCH

When an old mossyhorn leaves a saddle-pard his guns, there's only one highroad he can ride—the six-gun trail to a Boothill Tally!

THIS was to be the Scorpion's best job. His men lounged on either side of the dusty street. Two of them were to down the stage messenger; four more to take care of the express office and the gold in its opened safe. . . . They would be in the saddle and away before the startled citizens of Oreville knew that a holdup had taken place.

The Scorpion leaned carefully against a tie-rail and gazed down the sun-parched road. Suddenly he straightened, loosened, as if by instinct, the two big guns on his thighs. "Here she comes, boys!" he said.

A long-drawn coyote yell shrilled down wind. The stage came in at a driving run. Its horses slid to a stiff-legged stop and the double-braced Concord brought up with a rumbling, creaking jolt.

The Scorpion and his men started forward, circling like a wolf-pack for the kill. . . . Swiftly, as a dream, the unexpected happened.

Both doors of the Concord slammed open; and from them, one on either side, stepped down two lean and grizzled old-timers. Like as two peas they were, though one was short and the other tall. Each held a sawed-off shotgun in half-raised hands, and hell-fire blazed in their narrowed eyes, as they scanned the Scorpion's men.

The Scorpion's bandits halted, uncertainly. Hard-bitten men they were, with the odds at seven to two—but they had no heart to tackle these grim and powder-cured old-timers. Their hands dropped from their guns and they turned to glance at their leader.

But the Scorpion had rushed forward with a glad cry, hand outstretched, face wreathed in a gold-toothed grin.

"Long Jim!" he gasped.

Long Jim Curry, sheriff of the county, lowered his shotgun but did not relax his vigilance.

"Howdy, Goldface," he greeted; then raised his voice, calling to his companion: "Hi-yah, Joe! Here's Goldface!"

LITTLE Joe Weeden, deputy, sprinted around the end of the stagecoach. His leathery face crinkled beneath drooping silver mustaches as he shoved out his hand.

"Goldface Orton, you old heller!" he yelped, and slapped the Scorpion on the back till the dust flew. "What yo' been doin' with yoreself?"

"Ranchin'," lied the Scorpion glibly. "But what you boys doin' with th' heavy artill'ry?"

"We got word thet th' Scorpion was goin' t' holdup th' stage, so we moseys along as a sort o' surprise party. An' when we saw thet choice bunch o' gunfighters there," Joe nodded to the bandits on the plank sidewalk, "we shore thought th' fireworks was started!"

"Shucks!" The Scorpion chuckled merrily. "Why them's my boys! They's hard, all right, an' they's gunfighters; but I picked 'em thet way a-purpose. Th' Scorpion's been raidin' around here, an' I picked them boys special t' pertect my stock!"

"Meanin' th' sheriff o' th' county ain't enough pertection?" challenged Long Jim stiffly.

"Meanin' he ain't been so far!" flared Goldface.

Little Joe Weeden leaped between the two men.

"Why yo' hellin' tomcats! Five year since yo' seed each other an' yo're ready t' fly at each other's throats like strange mountain kitties! Yo' parted with harsh words, but I'll be danged if yo're goin' t' keep it up!" He clutched each man by the arm and turned him down the street. "Let's have a drink together—like in th' old days!"

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. . . the Scorpion hurtled through the door and landed crouching on the walk outside, his six-gun crashing in a thunderous roll of death.

The three men, Joe in the center, Long Jim and Goldface on either side—two famous law officers and an equally infamous outlaw—headed down the street toward a saloon.

For twenty years this trio had been pardners. They had shared a thousand dangers, and saved each other from an untimely end, a hundred times. They had fought Comanches on the Staked Plains; Pawnees in the Valley of the Loup; 'Rees and Blackfeet on the upper Missouri; turbaned Apaches in the Southwest. They had hazed cattle along the old trails from Texas to Montana. Their friendship was that steadfast fellowship one finds on the out-trails. And then, five years before, Long Jim and Goldface had quarreled.

IT had been over a trivial matter, as quarrels that break life-long friendships usually are. Goldface had been in the wrong, and he had left the other two. Long Jim and little Joe, drifting unhappily through fenced range, had come at last to the final rugged outposts of the old West—Southern Arizona.

Here, too, had drifted Goldface Orton—to become the Scorpion, the cruelest bandit chieftain in a land where Apaches were still very real. And his former pardners, sworn officers of the law, didn't know it!

Goldface Orton had been in a black mood when he started drinking, and each glass but made it blacker. He saw his men come in and stare curiously at him. He heard the stage start up outside, rumble down the street with the gold that should have been his. And gradually a great rage grew in his heart against these two men who had been his former companions. An ugly plan revolved itself in his mind. Goldface Orton had become the Scorpion indeed!

Little Joe Weeden was despairing of healing the torn friendship between his old time pardners. He poured glass after glass of the fiery forty-rod. He talked incessantly of the good old times. But his gaunt mustaches drooped forlornly.

Suddenly Goldface perked up. His face brightened. He brimmed the three glasses, tossed the half-full bottle into the air and smashed it with a careless shot from his left-hand Colt. He turned to Long Jim and held out his hand.

"Shucks, Jim," he said, "I been thinkin' Joe's right. We ought t' make up. Reckon I *was* a danged fool t' bust out thet-a-way five year ago. Will yo' shake—pardner?"

Long Jim's solemn old face creased in a leathery smile. He took the outstretched hand.

"I been waitin' five year for them words," he said simply. Then he raised his glass. "How—*pardners!*"

The three empty glasses came down as one, shattered on the edge of the table like tiny bombs. Little Joe Weeden waved frantically to the bartender.

"Bottles!" he yelled. "Dozens of 'em!"

They drank their liquor ceremoniously, like a couple plighting troth. And with the fumes of the whisky licking at his brain like a serpent's tongue, the Scorpion put into effect the second part of his plan.

OFTENTIMES, in the golden days of their friendship, the pardners had held "a test." It occurred always on these ceremonial binges—a real test of nerve and friendship and control over whisky-weakened muscles. It consisted of stepping off sixty paces and each shooting a tin cup of whisky from the head of the other.

This was the second part of the Scorpion's plan. Craftily he worked toward it.

"I reckon them *was* th' good ol' days," he chuckled. "Why shucks—th' only time in twenty year I ever seed Jim on th' prod was up t' Dodge when I wetted him down with coal oil!"

Long Jim nodded reminiscently. Goldface grinned at Weeden, went on:

"'Member, Joe? I went t' shoot a horn o' fire water off'n his haid an' plumb busted a coal oil lamp above him! Th' coal oil sopped inter his buckskin shirt somethin' scandalous an' he smelled worse'n a hydrophoby skunk!"

Little Joe rose to the bait.

"Thet's what you two mossheads ought t' do now! Thet's th' shorest way t' see-ment a pardnership—even after a feud o' five year! Let's see yore hands. . . . Why shucks! Yo're steady as a rock! Neither o' you is half drunk enough—bartender, bring up some bottles!"

"How about it, Jim? I got my old Sharps outside!"

Long Jim was silent, his face a perfect poker mask.

"Not scairt, are yo'?" chortled the Scorpion.

For a hushed moment Long Jim stared at him.

"No-o," he said slowly, "I'm not scairt. Go get yore rifle!"

Eagerly the Scorpion arose, lurching a little on his feet, and strode to the door of the saloon. Long Jim turned to Joe.

"Old pardner," he murmured gently, "he's not th' same Goldface we used t' know. He's changed—somehow."

Caught by the soberness of the other's voice, little Joe looked deep into his pardner's eyes. He tried to laugh it off, and failed. Joe had a great respect for Long Jim's knowledge of men.

"It's a danged fool's idear, anyhow—this whisky shoot," he mused. "Nobody

but a couple old mossheads like us would ever have thought of it. . . . Anyway, it'll be safe enough. Goldface is steady as lead, an' he can shoot th' eyes off'n a small dog at ten mile!"

Goldface returned, noisily triumphant, bearing the long-barreled Sharps' Special over the crook of his arm.

"Here she be!" he roared. "She'll throw a ounce an' a quarter o' lead spang through th' middle of a man at two thousan' yards! Barkeep, fill up a couple o' tin cups with thet rot-gut o' yore'n! . . . shall we toss for first shot?"

HE produced a silver dollar as he spoke and flipped it high against the ceiling.

"Haids," said Jim quietly as the coin started to descend.

Goldface guffawed as the dollar struck the table, rolled off onto the floor and turned up—tails!

"Reckon I get first chance t' ventilate yore skull, Jim!" he crowed—and even little Joe, watching closely, saw the tiny gleam in his eye; caught the slight vicious twist of his mouth.

For the first time Joe began to be afraid for Long Jim.

But there was no drawing back now. Long Jim's word had been given.

Goldface picked up the cup of whisky. Rifle over arm, he swaggered out the back door of the saloon. Long Jim and little Joe followed; and behind them came the members of the Scorpion's gang.

They chose a level place in front of the stables. There was a stout hitching post set deep into the ground here; and Long Jim took his place before it, the cup of whisky balanced on his head. Goldface, a trifle unsteadily, began pacing off the sixty long yards.

Long Jim's body was rigid; his face set in a deep, unruffled calm. His eyes stared straight ahead, fearless and shining. They watched Goldface turn at the sixtieth pace; they saw the long rifle barrel come up weaving, then slowly steady. Calmly, out of the corner of his mouth, Long Jim whispered:

"If'n he draws down too far, Joe—I leave you my guns!"

In a tense, dead silence the heavy barrel of the Sharps' Special came to rest. Joe, breathless beside Long Jim, could see the pale blue eyes of Goldface Orton squinting behind the sights, glittering down over the rifle barrel. He saw Goldface's chest rise and fall, then still as he held his breath. He almost caught the thought as Goldface's forefinger slowly squeezed the trigger.

Something seemed to catch at the back of Joe's throat. Suddenly he wanted to cry out, to throw himself in front of Long Jim. . . .

The heavy Sharps thundered in a burst of flame and smoke. Close beside him Joe heard the sharp *spat-t* of the bullet. He saw Long Jim's eyes jerk queerly. An icy numbness closed down on his heart as he saw the raw, welling hole in Jim's forehead.

Hit—dead center!

Long Jim teetered back against the hitching post. Then he slumped suddenly and collapsed forward upon his face. The tin cup fell from his head and spilled its whisky into the yellow dust. . . .

IN solemn, awful silence Joe stared at the crumpled figure of his pardner. He felt strangely quiet, impassive. His brain, numbed by the shock, refused to work. He moved impersonally, like an automaton. Men said afterwards that he was smiling as he knelt over the body of Long Jim.

But if little Joe was quiet, the Scorpion was just the opposite. He cast his rifle from him as if it had been an accursed thing. He staggered toward the corpse of the friend he had shot, beating his forehead with his fists. He dropped, groaning, beside little Joe.

"It was th' whisky!" he muttered thickly. "Th' whisky! To think thet after all these years—"

Little Joe raised his dry blue eyes. He gazed impersonally at Goldface. He said not a word—just that calm, blank stare.

The Scorpion's eyes dropped. He bent lower over the body of Long Jim. He felt the cold, accusing eyes of Joe Weeden boring into the back of his neck. He turned, tried to meet their gaze. He couldn't. With a stifled, rasping curse, he lurched to his feet and staggered away. He picked up his rifle, signed to his men, and disappeared around the corner of the saloon.

The Scorpion had stung, and his sting had been death.

Little Joe shouldered the limp body of Long Jim and carried it into the saloon. He laid it gently on a poker table and covered its face with his own soft-brimmed sombrero. . . .

The front door of the saloon burst open and a man dashed in.

"I just saw th' Scorpion!" he yelled. "Th' Scorpion an' six of his men just rode out of town!"

Men gave way before him and he came to where the little deputy stood by the body of his chief.

"Yo' shore it was th' Scorpion?" asked Joe—his voice was curiously strange and flat.

"Shore as I'm standin' here! His big gold tooth was shinin' all over his grinnin' face!"

Little Joe looked down at the body of Long Jim.

"So *thet* was th' Scorpion!" he whispered—and men who did not know him swore that he smiled as he plucked Long Jim's Colts from their holsters.

JOE WEEDEN took the body of Long Jim back to the county seat. Gradually, as his mind cleared from the shock, he thought the matter over. He could not be *sure* that Goldface had deliberately murdered Long Jim. He tried to believe that it was not so. Yet the facts were utterly damning. And deep down in his heart Joe knew that it was true.

To Joe Weeden, Goldface Orton would be "the Scorpion" henceforth and forevermore—and sometime, somewhere Joe knew that he would catch up with him and force the confession of Long Jim's murder from his lips!

Joe saddled his old "Gunpowder-hoss." He rolled up some grub in a blanket and tarp and tied it back of the saddle. He tucked his Sharps into its boot by the left stirrup. He filled his shell belts till their weight dragged on his lean hips. With Long Jim's guns in his holsters and a cold, tight-lipped smile on his face, he swung into the saddle and jogged forth on the trail of the Scorpion.

He rode first to Oreville, and from there struck north and east. Somewhere, he knew, in the up-torn butte country before him, the Scorpion maintained a permanent camp.

For a week Joe rode with the ceaseless vigilance of an Apache on the war-trail. He kept always to high ground, but shunned skylines as he would loco weed. He quartered the country much as a schooner tacking before a breeze; and his tacks grew longer and longer as he proceeded.

On the seventh day he found what he sought—the permanent camp of the Scorpion and his men. It was a group of three log-and-adobe cabins—piñon logs dragged from the high hills to the north—set in a tiny grass-filled valley between two buttes. The largest of the three cabins—the bunkhouse—was loop-holed for defense, and a tiny stream of clear water trickled down the butte behind it and ran beneath its floor.

"Wah!" exclaimed Joe admiringly, "Goldface shore knows how t' set up a camp thet's foolproof 'gainst attack. *He* don't take no chances! But I reckon I don't want t' attack him—yet. I just want t' slip a greased pig inter his plans. . . . Now if I can slide down thet butte—"

HE had picked a time after supper, when the men were busy with cards and conversation, so that any accidental noise of his descent would not be noticed. He could hear the buzz of their voices now as he crouched at the rear of the cabin.

But it was only a dull murmur—Joe wanted to hear what they were saying. With a chill tightening his muscles, he slid his lank frame, feet first, into the icy water of the stream and under the floor of the cabin!

The conversation came clear now, through the cracks of the warped floor boards above him. And even as the icy chill of the spring water clutched at his muscles, Joe knew that his effort was worth the torture.

The men in the bunkhouse were discussing the Scorpion's plan for a bank robbery!

"I shore hope it works better'n th' big stage holdup!" grunted one.

"Huh! That *was* a good plan—till them two hell-spittin' ol'-timers busted out o' th' stagecoach! Them two scatter guns looked as big t' me as th' cannons down

in Galveston!" This was evidently a man of parts.

"I wonder what th' real story back o' that shootin' was?" broke in a third.

"Near as I could make out, they was old time pardners an' th' other two didn't know our boss was th' Scorpion. Anyways, th' boss downed th' sheriff, which plumb satisfies *me!*"

"Uh-huh, but *still* I'd hate t' have that little deppity with th' walrus mustaches burnin' *my* trail when he finds out who th' Scorpion is!" This from the man of parts, again.

There was a sound, as of someone turning in a bunk, and a querulous voice sang out: "Hey! Ain't you hoot-owls *ever* goin' t' bed? Yuh'll prob'ly fall asleep in th' vestee-bule o' th' bank tomorrer!"

The "hoot-owls" growled a sharp retort; a boot hurtled through the air. There was the sound of chairs being pushed back over the uneven floor. Joe could not wait to hear more. He had to get away before all the men retired, and the camp settled into the deep quiet of an Arizona night.

He had learned that there was to be a bank holdup on the morrow—where and at what time he did not know. Nor did he have a chance to think of it as he fought his precarious way up the perpendicular side of the butte. His wet clothes stuck to him uncomfortably, hindering his movements; his chilled muscles cramped as he urged them to their utmost. His numbed fingers groped fumblingly on the rock, till their nails were broken and bleeding.

He reached the top of the butte, spent and gasping for breath, as the moon came up. He hurried down the opposite side, gathering mesquite as he went, till he came to the tiny pocket where he had hobbled his horse. He built a roaring fire, laid out his clothes to dry, and rolled up snug in his blanket, sleeping the sleep of the justly tired.

JOE awakened at the first gray streak of dawn. He fried and ate the last of his bacon and saddled "Gunpowder." He examined his guns—Long Jim's Colts—carefully, to be sure they had not been harmed by the wetting of the night before; and was in the saddle before the sun rose.

Joe needed to know what bank the Scorpion meant to rob. He watched, therefore, crouched behind two boulders on a distant butte, while the Scorpion and his men—seven in all—rode forth from the little valley. He saw them separate, riding at divergent angles, so as to leave no trail. Joe followed the Scorpion straight into the west.

At the edge of the buttes the Scorpion halted. Soon, from right and left, came the scattered members of his gang. In a compact group they headed due west across the rolling desert, through sun-tortured rock and Spanish bayonet—straight toward the county seat, and the Mescalero County Bank.

Joe watched them until their dust cloud had dwindled in the still, dry air. Then he urged Gunpowder into a steady tireless lope and pounded leather in a wide circle toward the town.

He arrived at two o'clock. If the Scorpion had maintained the jog-trot he had started, Joe believed he had beaten him by an hour. He glanced at the clock in the adobe-walled bank. Yes, that would be right. The Scorpion would figure to arrive at three, when the bank was closing.

Joe rode slowly up the dusty street. He stopped at the bank, at the three saloons, and finally at the sheriff's office. "Get yore guns, boys," he said at each stop; "th' Scorpion's comin' t' rob th' bank!"

At the sheriff's office Joe worked out a plan of defense for the two junior deputies. When he was sure they understood, he led Gunpowder around to the stable in back, took off his saddle and rubbed him down for ten minutes.

One of the deputies came into the shed just as Joe was cinching the saddle on a fresh horse—a wiry pinto.

"You ain't goin' away again, are you?" he sputtered. "With th' Scorpion due any minute?"

Joe tightened the cinch and stood off wiping his brow.

"Son," he said gently, "you've rode with ol' Long Jim. Now, just suppose Long Jim was at th' haid o' these men o' th' Scorpion's. Do you think *he* would ever get hisself killed in an ambush even as foolproof as th' one we've fixed for th' Scorpion?"

The young deputy scratched his head.

"No-o, I reckon not!" he said slowly.

"Well, neither will th' Scorpion! . . . That's why I'm goin' out by myself an' bring him in after he gets away from th' town here!" Joe swung into the saddle and rode away toward the buttes on his own back-trail.

IT was ten minutes of three by the clock in the bank when a group of seven dust-coated horsemen jogged leg-to-leg into the waiting town.

The Scorpion rode in the lead, his gold tooth shining through a set, thin-lipped smile. His eyes shuttled like moonlight on flashing steel. They searched the street before him. Something was wrong here! The Scorpion's subtle frontiersman's sense of danger warned him.

"I don't like it!" he whispered to his *segundo*. "Th' town's too damn quiet—like a cut tree, waitin' t' fall!"

The seven bandits halted before the bank. They dismounted and looped their reins loosely over the hitching rack. Two men stayed by the horses. Two men guarded the door of the bank, watching the street either way. The Scorpion, the *segundo* and one other went inside.

Again as he entered the bank, the Scorpion felt the hackling call of danger. The muscles at the back of his neck thrilled and twitched. In the brittle dawns of earlier days he had known that feeling just before an Indian charge. . . . But it was too late to turn back now.

The Scorpion stepped up to the teller's cage.

"Can yo' change a hundred dollar bill?" he asked politely. Then his voice changed, hardened; rasped like the grate of steel: "Stick yore paws up!"

The teller obeyed. His hands went up. But even as he reached for the ceiling he kicked a slender wire that had been tied in front of his foot.

In the back room of the bank the president held the other end of that wire. He felt the jerk. He waved his handkerchief out the window. The Scorpion was caught at last—trapped in the very act of a holdup!

OUTSIDE a ragged volley crashed. From door and window of the saloon; from the upper windows of the building opposite; from the roofs of houses down the street—pale blue powder smoke puffed upward.

The two men by the door collapsed without a move. One of the men guarding the horses toppled and fell as he reached for his six-gun. The other crouched behind the horses and emptied his six-gun before a bullet clipped through the top of his skull. . . . Sharpshooters behind Winchesters had a regard for the horses.

The Scorpion looked at his *segundo*. "Shucks!" he said, "I *was* right! Well, we'll run for it—I been in tighter places than this!" He turned with grim humor to the teller. "Never mind th' change." he said—then his other Colt leaped into his left hand as he raced for the door.

The *segundo* and the other bandit leaped through the door and went down in crumpled heaps as rifles flashed from across the street. There was a tense, breathless pause—and then like a roaring, flame-spurting comet the Scorpion hurtled through the door and landed crouching on the walk outside, his two guns crashing in a thunderous roll of death.

Winchesters and Sharps banged at him from across the street; six-shooters rattled like giant firecrackers. Bullets tore through his clothes with vicious *zip-ps*.

He tore the reins loose from the tie-rail, pulled down the plunging black—flung himself into the saddle. As the black backed, cat-wise, the Scorpion snatched a Winchester from its scabbard on the nearest horse— Then the great black had whirled, like a fighting catamount, and was racing up the street headlong in a welter of dust. From its back a flaming Winchester belched hot lead in a rolling tattoo.

The Scorpion had gone, blasting his way from the death trap with his own powder smoke. . . . And on the trail ahead, somewhere, was little Joe Weeden, prepared to deal justice, in his own way, to the man who had shot his pard!

JOE struck the buttes at the point where he had left them that morning. He settled down behind two boulders on a tiny rise just off the Scorpion's outgoing trail. He was certain that the Scorpion would escape from the ambush in town.

Joe shoved one of the huge brass cartridges into the breech of his Sharps'

Special, tilted the rifle against the rock, and waited.

Half an hour passed, and the shadows of rock and cactus lengthened across the hard-packed desert sand. Then, under the lowering sun, Joe spied a thin, creeping dust cloud.

Joe picked up the Sharps'. He rested it on the side of the boulder in the shade, where the westering sun wouldn't reflect from its barrel. He drew a long breath, and his thumb clicked back the hammer.

The Scorpion came on apace. He was directly abreast of Joe and ninety yards away when the Sharps' roared. The black crossed his forelegs and went down like a sledged steer. The Scorpion hurtled forward through the air, somersaulted on the hard ground, and lay still.

Joe laid down the rifle. He stood up, loosened the two big Colts at his thighs; stepped forth from behind the boulder.

"Goldface!" he called; then louder, *"Goldface!"*

The Scorpion stirred. He stared around him. He saw Joe. Slowly he picked himself up, rose to his feet facing the deputy.

Joe began walking forward, slowly, his hands brushing the butts of his Colts as he advanced.

"Goldface!" he called again, his voice a hiss that barely carried the intervening distance. "I've got Long Jim's guns here. . . . He left 'em to me—in case yo' drawed down too far! Did yo' mean to kill him, Goldface?"

The Scorpion's frame stiffened in every muscle. His eyelids dropped half over his eyes.

"Did yo' arrange for thet?" He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the distant town.

Joe nodded.

"Then," snarled the Scorpion, "I reckon I'll have t' kill *you,* too!"

A LIVING flame seemed to leap up within Joe. A rushing, as of the beat of powerful wings, sounded in his ears. His mind raced like a humming motor, and his muscles tensed like coiled springs. All motion seemed to slow down, but Joe knew from experience that it was he who speeded up.

He looked at the Scorpion; and the sky, the ground, the dead pony—everything around him—dissolved in a reddish mist. Only the figure of the Scorpion itself stood out sharp and clear and vivid in microscopic detail. Joe could see the gleaming half-closed eyes; could almost read the thoughts in them. Joe laughed aloud—he had had his answer!

"Come a-foggin'," he called. *"This* ain't goin' t' be no *cold-blooded murder!"*

Slowly the Scorpion slid forward. His knees were bent, and he crouched slightly, muscles relaxed. Joe knew that crouch; knew the lightning draw it preceded. Joe could never hope to beat that draw. He could tie it—but that was all. The Scorpion knew it, too. The gods of right and wrong would settle the affair.

Forty yards — gun range — and Joe felt himself slowing. He remained upright, but he moved now with a sliding, balanced gait. His muscles were relaxed—the deceptive relaxation of the panther that adds speed to its spring.

Fifteen yards—twelve—ten—eight! Joe, staring into the Scorpion's eyes, caught the thought that preceded action. His own hands swept down and up. Long Jim's Colts roared at his hips.

The Scorpion staggered and his half-raised guns exploded into the ground at Joe's feet. He stumbled forward into the eddying smoke of their discharge and the weapons dropped from his nerveless fingers. He fought his last fight then—to stay on his feet—and won. He lifted his face to look at Joe while the deathly pallor spread through his tan.

"Don't shoot any more, Joe," he whispered, "I—was—wrong!" He smiled then, although his eyes were closed; and smiling, pitched forward and lay still.

The gods of right and wrong had settled the affair. . . .

THE posse from town came upon Deputy Sheriff Joe Weeden just as the sun went down. He was piling rocks over a shallow grave in the desert. His blue eyes were steady, but a thin, dark line on his dusty cheek betrayed where a single tear had fought its way through stubborn lids. . . . His holsters were empty. Long Jim's guns were buried with the body of Goldface Orton.

OUTLAW!

By BARRY SCOBEE

Here is a story that comes once in a blue moon—a yarn that will strike home to the heart of any man who ever sat saddle.

THE great dread of the wild horse herds, in the brakes below the Rimrock, on the Rio Grande was men with ropes.

For a year I ran with my mother and the other mares and colts of our bunch, and the harsh old stallion, drinking from the water springs in the cool dawn, or among the tules at the river's edge in the heat of the day, galloping the hills with the wind in our manes, as free as the wind, save for that constant watch the old ones kept for the coming of men.

As a yearling, the dread was just be-

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ginning to become a part of me when one day three Mexicans rode up on us suddenly with loops of ropes in their hands, when we were drinking in the shade of the reeds, as we liked to do before the water grew warm.

For a moment we were frozen. The men shouted, looking at me. I became frightened, and instead of waiting for a cue from my mother I broke and ran, the three riders shouting and bunching after me.

Ropes, ropes, ropes! A noose hissed through the air, settled around my neck. A terrific jerk. Sprawling on the ground, half stunned. Ropes about my legs. Ropes, ropes, ropes, until three days later one of the Mexicans led me to what I had seen heretofore only from a distance —the corral pens and sheds and houses of humans. Two men were there: a tall, hawk-eyed young fellow with a hooked nose and a humorous twist around his lean mouth; and an older man, squat and powerful, bareheaded and with spikey, sunburned hair and a bullying eye.

"Ten dollah," said the Mexican. "I sell you this li'l' black stallion colt fo' ten dollah, Meester Hilliard. He got what you Americanos say, those high spirit."

Hilliard laughed coarsely. And no wonder. My coat was rough and dirty from wallowing and sweating, and I was gaunt and weary, and rubbed raw in spots, from fighting that rope. Hilliard said scornfully: "Ten bucks for that mustang!" And he kicked me in the belly with every ounce of his squat strength.

I flew at him with all the savage hate and fear in me, rearing, baring my teeth, squealing, striking.

The lean young fellow with the lean grin laughed out: "Ha-ha-haw!" And said: "That colt's got the goods."

Hilliard dodged under a shed and out again with a length of pitchfork handle and proceeded to beat me without mercy. He was beside himself. I was tied to a tree and could not get away.

"Here," protested the young man in a sharp tone. "You oughtn't to beat that colt like that. He's the kind you can make a killer horse out of."

"Keep your hooked Dundeegle nose out of this!" Hilliard flared. "You, Turk, stay back!"

But Turk was doing just exactly not that. He was stepping in. He yanked the club out of Hilliard's hands and flung it down. Then he held out his hand to me with pleading, soothing words. I sensed a friend, though I leaned back hard on the rope. But when his fingers touched me I relaxed, and as he stroked me I stood there trembling like an old mare that has made a long, wild run with the herd.

"The famous Dundeegle way with horses!" sneered Hilliard. "The Gypsy blood in your veins. They say you Dundeegles are half hoss."

"Okay," retorted young Turk Dundeegle coolly. "If Gypsy blood makes a man decent to horses I'm much obliged that my way-back Scottish ancestors gave me a few drops."

Turk took some money from his pocket and said across my back to the wide-eyed Mexican, "Here's your ten dollars, Chon. I'll buy your colt."

"No you don't!" cut in Hilliard. "Buy him myself. Goin' to learn that little stud he can't fight a white man."

Hilliard took money from a purse and paid my price to the Mexican.

"Now, Spike," said Turk, "I'll give you two bucks and a half for your bargain."

"No."

"I'll make it five."

"No! Your Dundeegle code — if you want a hoss, get him, and a hoss ain't yours till he's in your pen—your family code don't drag no hay with me. Now shet up."

Turk stepped away from me three or four paces and looked me over.

"I'll make it ten," he said. "Twenty dollars for a little black colt."

"No—no—no!" bawled Hilliard. "Git off o' my land. I'm goin' break that colt of the killer idear or break his bones!"

AFTER a day or two Hilliard turned me loose in the yard. It had a high rail fence and was two hundred yards from front to back, with a house in the center, and black locust trees for shade. But that yard was small and cramped compared to the knolls and dells of the river brakes. I had sweet water from a well to drink, but it lacked the smell of the river's flow and the gurgle of the stream in the reeds.

All day long I would haunt the rear

fence, pacing back and forth until I wore a deep path, peering between the rails at the distant blue-gray Rimrock, beyond which I sensed the riverlands lay.

Hilliard, bawdy-mouthed, bareheaded, his sunburnt hair sticking out like spikes, would noose me around the neck with his rope and pull me about, teaching me to lead. He would slap and box me, and I would fight, because I was afraid of his presence and the evil odor from him. He would beat me with that length of pitchfork handle, taking joy in doing so.

His beatings made me hard to catch. I got so I could dodge his hurtling hard-rope noose, or flick it aside with a toss of my head. It became so he had to ride a cowhorse to overhaul me.

Life would have been wholly bitter and bleak had not Turk Dundeegle come across the rangeland frequently, offering always to buy me. He would pet me, and curry and rub me down, making my black coat a garment of glossy beauty. And all the time he would talk soothing, gentle talk, particularly on those occasions when the ranchman, Hilliard, was not at home.

And he'd say to Hilliard: "Fifty dollars, Spike. Eh, how about it?" Or, "Seventy-five today, Spike, for the li'l' black colt without a white hair on 'im." "Spike, I've saved some money — I raise my bid to a hundred for Handsome Midnight, and positively my last offer." At every raise Hilliard would bristle and shout a little louder that no money would buy the black till the black was broken.

Despite Turk's great good heart toward horses he never once seemed to notice the deep and deeper path that I was wearing in the ground along the rearward fence—the prisoner path of longing.

BY the end of the first year of my captivity Turk's bid was two hundred dollars, and he came with the money in his hand, slapping it across his palm.

"No—no!" yelled Hilliard. "Off o' my land, and stay off."

"I want that horse in my pen," persisted Turk. "And I won't rest till I get him there."

"You'll steal him, then," flared the ranchman. "And I wouldn't put it past a Dundeegle to go to hoss stealin' to own the hoss he craves."

There was more of it, hotter and hotter, until Turk went away in anger, for the first time. I wondered if he would ever return.

I was two years old at this time, and Hilliard's hate of me had grown to a mountain. I was expert at nipping at him with my strong teeth, and kicking, and striking with my forehoofs. Always in self-defense, I must say in fairness to myself. Or nearly always. Sometimes — I must say, in justice to him—when he was winded and angry from trying to catch me, I would nip and strike and squeal to make him take shelter under the low shed just to torment him.

Usually, though, I got the worst of it. A beating with the pitchfork handle. Or he'd rope my feet and throw me and nail shoes on, or pull shoes off, just to show me he could.

About a month after I was two years old, in the days of May and June, when Turk had never come back any more, a loneliness came over me, an unspeakable longing to be free and run again with the colts and mares and stallions down in the river brakes—a weary loneliness that one day made me lay my jaws across the top rail of my prison fence. And my weight broke the rail. Its falling loosened the end of the next rail so that it, too, dropped down.

The accident thrilled and frightened me. I sprang away, looking to see if Hilliard were coming in a rage. I got away from the spot. But Hilliard did not come, and after a time I went back. The fence was possible for me now. My blood sang.

Presently Hilliard came from the house and drove off in his light truck, without noticing the broken fence. When he was out of sight behind the corral and hills, with my very feet thrilling and prancing, I reared for the fence and took the leap. It was still too high. But the rails broke under me, and I slid over, landing four-footed outside. I was away with an eager whinny, running with all my might straight in the direction that my instincts told me was home.

But to make a bad story short, I came upon Hilliard and his truck at a trough, and he set after me in the machine. He could head me off quickly. He could race at my side, pressing me in a long curve

back toward the ranch headquarters. I was no match for that thing of steel and stinks and noise, and in the end he noosed me from the seat and practically dragged me back, winded and wheezing and ready to drop.

A crew of men tore the old rail fence out and put in a nine-foot mesh-wire fence on strong posts, while Hilliard grinned at me. He made the gates as high as the fence, and he did new things to take his spite out on me.

One day, when the demon had got up in him because I kicked and cavorted and dodged him, he stopped and did some work, while he muttered, among the locust trees between the kitchen porch and the shed. When it was finished he was after me again, and I went galloping high and wide among the locusts. Suddenly my feet were tripped and I was hurtled headlong all in a bunch against the end of the shed.

He had fastened wires low among the trees and tripped me. Once more, another day, he fooled me with the same trick, so that I was thrown in a muscle-and-bone wrenching plunge. But he never fooled me again with that.

I was scarcely over the scars and limps from these damaging tumbles when Turk Dundeegle came back, bidding yet a higher price. How he soothed my injuries, and muttered at Hilliard. He and the ranchman were anything but friendly, yet did not quarrel. After that Turk kept coming again, often when Hilliard was away. And what visits we had! But he never said once that he wished I were free again and back among my kind. He did say, though:

"Midnight, Handsome, I want you in my lot—I am a mind to steal you!"

But he didn't, and months dragged on, spring rolled once more and I was three years old, with almost my full growth.

Then it was that things went wrong all in a day.

THE trouble started when I tried to break out again, to go over that nine-foot mesh-wire fence. I don't know why I did, except that an irresistible pressure held me to run again with the wild herds down the windy ridges. In madness I reared and stretched for the top of the fence. My leap fell short. I dropped back, and my forefeet slid down the wires. My heavy shoe caught a strand, and snapped it. And two or three more strands snapped. This time Hilliard was on hand. He came running and cursing.

By the time he had the fence mended two Mexicans had driven up a bunch of cows and calves, and the three men proceeded to brand the calves. The Mexicans did the throwing and Hilliard the branding, taking a long-handled iron from the fire on the ground and holding it against the little fellows while they bawled in agony and fright, and smoke of burning hair rolled away in a cloud. It unnerved me, sent me to racing back and forth, and watching, head flung high. Once Hilliard looked at the iron in his hand, and at me, then back to the iron, and his round unshaven face broke into an evil grin. My blood seemed to turn cold.

The next morning he went away in his car, by the road. When he returned late in the evening he had a new branding iron, which he shook at me with a smirk on his face. I spent an uneasy, jumpy night. The next forenoon, when he had finished the ordinary ranch work, he rode into the yard on a horse and proceeded to rope me. I fought desperately. I slid and dodged and doubled and tore up the ground with my hoofs. But in the end he had me, lying on the ground in the dust near the forge under the edge of the shed with my four feet bound together.

He made a fire in the forge and began to turn the wheel, heating the new iron. I struggled to break loose and get up. But all that I succeeded in was beating the ground with my head.

My ears caught the sound of steadily galloping hoofs, and I knew that a ridden horse was coming. Then I saw Turk ride up to the back fence. He saw me at once. He did not even get to the ground, but stepped from the saddle to the wire fence and climbed over as quickly as a cat, dropping on his feet into my deep-worn prisoner path of longing.

He came running forward on tiptoe, drawing out and opening his knife. Before he could reach me to whack the ropes Hilliard sensed him and looked around. The man bristled, yelped hoarsely, and came brandishing the long-handled branding iron. The redoubtable, chunky figure made Turk stop uncertainly.

"Stay back!" Hilliard growled. "Don't try cuttin' that horse loose."

"Don't try branding him then!" snarled Turk, his long, dark, hawkish face flaming with wrath. "Don't burn him. I don't want him hurt. Don't want your brand on my property."

They stood facing each other furiously, knife and iron ready for combat.

Then, slowly, Turk yielded to sense. He snicked his knife shut, thrust it into his pocket, and drew forth a sheaf of money, which he slapped across his palm.

"Five hundred, Mr. Hilliard," said he. "Five centuries for the stallion, and horses harder to sell than buggy whips these days. We ain't sold a thing off of our two-by-four horse ranch in three months but a little knot of polo ponies. I've been two years affording five hundred—can't afford it now. But you take this wad and I'll lead Midnight home, taking the responsibility of owning a valuable horse."

Hilliard's little eyes glittered greedily at the money, but he shook off the feeling and asked a question.

"How'd you happen here on this partic'lar day?"

"I saw you in town yesterday getting a new Double H brand made. Knew you used to brand your horses with the Double H. I thought you might be up to something."

"Cute, ain't you? I ain't never seen nothing ache so bad as a Dundeegle wantin' the hoss he wants. Heh-heh."

"Five hundred cash, Mr. Hilliard, and I'll let you be—"

"No! No! That stud tried to break out again yesterday. I aim to burn him in half a dozen places on his onery hide so's if he ever gits out and away ain't none o' you horse grabbers can ever lay claim to him. Now git out."

He eyed Turk a minute, wavered, and bent down to put coal on the forge. In a wink Turk had the money stowed away and his knife out, turning to my ropes. But before he could make a good slash Hilliard was at him with the branding iron.

They fought around and around me, and across me, Hilliard swinging at Turk with mighty grunts and Turk dodging and slashing at my bonds at every chance. Hilliard lost his balance on a swing, Turk jerked the iron from his hands, and he stumbled over my neck and fell. Before he was up Turk had my ropes cut and I was scrambling to my feet.

"Go it, Midnight!" yelled Turk. "Climb a tree!"

As I got safely out of the way Hilliard came to his feet and started for the house, swearing he'd get his shotgun.

"You here when I come out," he yelled at Turk, "I'll give you both barrels."

"Gimme the lock and stock, too," said Turk, "and I'll have a gun."

But as Hilliard vanished into the house, Turk's grim humor vanished. He gave me a parting look and got over the fence as quickly as he could.

WHEN Hilliard came bareheaded from the house and saw Turk riding swiftly away, he looked at me in a way that chilled my blood. I knew the use of the shotgun. I had seen him shoot hawks and cats, and the old dog, with it. He lifted and pointed the gun at me and I went frantic. I raced about the yard. He came shouting gibberish. I tried to plunge over the fence. Fell back. Raced for the front yard, hoping that the high front gate would by some chance be open for once in the world. It wasn't.

Hilliard, shouting after me, his face distorted, I raced back. He pressed in, and I found myself in the corner between the end of the shed and the high fence. Flecks of foam were darting from Hilliard's lips like sparks. But even then he did not shoot. Instead, he set the gun inside the shed and seized a pitchfork and came at me with that, lunging at my nose.

I cringed and dodged, so that his thrust missed. He came on, and this time I reared straight and high above him, to escape those bright tines. I was mad from fear. I felt the steel points strike my breast. I came plunging blindly down to fight off that thing. And my forehoof, with the heavy shoe, struck him across the forehead and face, knocking him backward. The pitchfork banged against the boards of the shed.

I fled wildly. I raced back and forth. I trod my deep path by the rear fence, trying, senselessly, like a fowl to get out of a coop. I noticed that Hilliard did not move, had not moved, and that filled me with a new kind of terror.

I ran up as near as I could make myself go to him, stretched toward him and sniffed. Then I whipped away, afraid and wild. But I was irresistibly drawn back, craning, thrusting forward, sniffing, ready to leap away, but driving myself nearer. And this time I knew that I smelled death.

I don't know how long I careened about the yard, sending neigh after neigh rolling out across the rangeland, before Turk's big hat appeared in the corral and he came pushing through the gate by the shed.

"Boy, what's the matter with you?" he frowningly asked. "You act like—I don't know what." Then: "Hi-yi, Mr. Hilliard, where are you? I'm peaceful. Just one more confab and I'll call it square."

He stepped around the shed and saw Hilliard on the ground. He froze. He gaped. He went and squatted by the body. After a moment he screwed around on his heel and looked at me.

"Midnight!" he said. "Midnight!"

He came and petted me, hugging my neck.

"Boy, boy," he kept saying, "why did you do it? Oh, Handsome, you're mine!"

I muzzled his hands.

Impulsively he hurried back to Hilliard and laid the sheaf of money on the ground by the ranchman's hand. He took up a halter and started back to me, but stopped, tossed the halter back under the shed, and picked up the five hundred.

"No use to do that," he said. "They'd know you did it, with that deep mark of the horseshoe. Just make us tell a pack of lies."

He went into the kitchen, where I could hear him at the telephone, speaking the name of Sheriff Townsend and the names of some of the neighbors. Pretty soon he came back to me.

"Thirty miles for the sheriff to come from town," he said. "Neighbors will be here before he is. But they can't kill you, can't execute you for a killer horse. They can't—they can't! You're mine!"

MEN came in cars in twos and threes. They looked at Hilliard. They looked at me. They asked Turk questions. They began to bicker, Turk and those men. A man came pegging up the yard on a peg-leg, long gray hair flying, his swarthy face looking greasy. He was louder than the rest. He said things about a horse killing a man and paying the penalty. He harangued the men, while Turk stood back sullenly. Most of the men had rifles. Pegleg named a half dozen of them, and all at once they were stepping out with half-ready guns. But Turk sprang in front of them, so that they stopped uncertainly.

"No, you don't!" he cried. "You can't kill him!"

"That's a killer hoss," asserted Pegleg. "You tryin' to override the custom of the county, the common code of the whole dang ranch country, to kill a hoss, or bull, or dog, when he kills a man?"

"That's when an animal kills maliciously, or is dangerous," countered Turk.

"You say this black stud ain't malicious and dangerous?" Pegleg shouted.

"No. Not if he's treated halfway decent."

"Stand aside!" Pegleg was a man of reckless force. "Stand aside, I said!"

Turk cast about for a weapon. Snatched up the shotgun Hilliard had tossed into the shed. He flung back on the men, the gun going *kl-kl-klk* as he cocked it.

"I aim to have that horse!" he said. "Alive."

A curious thing happened to those men. Their faces went strange and hard and their lips thin, as if the cocking of that gun had been an insult they would not endure. And one of them said through his teeth:

"Turk, you done tore your shirt. Drop that shotgun!"

That was all. All but the hot stillness. And danger for Turk. Because he did not drop the gun. Then a voice cut in on the tenseness—a tall and bony man with a kindly face coming on the scene.

"Well—well," he cajoled. "The battle of Bunker Hill and the Alamo all over again. Six men to one youth o' votin' age—"

He saw Hilliard, and squatted by him, and said:

"The black stallion finally got Bully Hilliard, eh?"

"You see the print o' the horseshoe acrost his mug, Sheriff."

"You were about to execute the animal?"

"That's what."

"And Turk objecting." The officer got to his feet. "You know the fate of a killer horse, Turk," he said gently.

"But, Sheriff," protested Turk, "if a man ever got killed by a horse and deserved it, it was Hilliard. He kicked the colt the first time he ever saw him. He's beaten and tortured and tormented Midnight ever since."

"Doesn't look as if Midnight were any angel, Turk," said the sheriff.

They all stood there, waiting. If they would only pick up that pitchfork! It would surely have blood on the tines, for they had brought blood on me, and the wounds would have been burning now had I had time to heed them. But I sensed that my fate was hanging in the balance.

"You can't blame Midnight," said Turk. "And you can't kill him."

"You like him, do you, Turk?—that wild mustang?"

"Do I! You know the Dundeegle about horses. Why, no Dundeegle in my day has ever owned a horse equal to Midnight. He's no mustang, if you mean by that a horse descended from the horses the first Spaniards brought over. He's part mustang, and he's part Thoroughbred, and some Morgan, and a drop of trotting blood —look at that shapely—"

"What would you do with him?" the sheriff cut in.

"Why, take him home. Keep him."

"You have a big yard like this for him?"

"Have a corral—not near as big as this."

"With a high wire fence like this?"

"You know we haven't, Sheriff Townsend. A board fence, as high as this wire."

"Tight?"

"Yes. He couldn't get out."

"Couldn't see out, either, could he?"

Turk flushed a little.

"No."

"About a month ago," the sheriff pressed on, gently, "I stopped to give lonesome old Hiram Hilliard a friendly howdy-do. I saw that deep trench the horse has tramped along the rear fence. Looked like he's been mighty longing to get back to freedom down in the river brakes—some horses can't be domesticated."

The sheriff kind of waited, studying Turk. Turk shifted uneasily.

"I can't do that, Sheriff Townsend," said Turk in a hard tone. "Couldn't turn Midnight loose. I've wanted him for two years —the Dundeegles have got a kind of code about getting the horses they want—look here, I brought five hundred dollars to pay for Midnight. You take it for a kind of bond, and let me have charge of Midnight till the court says I can have him for keeps."

All at once the sheriff's face was as bleak as rock. He nodded to Pegleg.

"All right," he said, "go ahead. The horse has killed a man — has broken the human law. He's got to pay the penalty." He nodded again.

"You can't — you can't!" cried Turk. "He's mine. He'll come when I whistle. He—we—men, you can't!"

SILENCE was as thick and heavy as the still heat. The hard, relentless faces of the men held me spellbound, watching, listening, head up, my forelegs spread, all set to flee—I knew not where. Oh, if only Turk or the sheriff would see that pitchfork! But they did not, and the officer spoke again, brittle as bark.

"All right, men, go to it."

"Okay!" sang old Pegleg, hopping about. "Men, your guns ready? Let's show this young upstart Dundeegle once and for all the Dundeegle tribe can't forever mess in and run every horse deal that bobs up—show 'em they ain't the only men that's got a way with hosses — heh-heh!"

Turk's dark skin was drained of blood. He looked pinched.

"Just a minute, men," he pleaded, and a wild light leaped in his eyes. "If you are going to execute Midnight, let him die like a soldier in honor, against the wall. Let me lead him up to the end of the shed."

Townsend looked hard at Turk again, narrow-eyed, and nodded permission. Turk whistled to me and held out his hand. I had no other hope. I went up to him, muzzling. And I followed when he led me by the mane.

We came face to face with the men with guns, though I wanted to draw back. Then I saw something that made my every muscle leap — the great front gate was standing open! Turk let go my mane. I felt his palm slide along my back caressingly. Then a tense little pat, like a farewell. Then a slap and a screeching shout.

And in the same instant I leaped through that line of men and was racing for the gate, while Turk was shouting:

"Go it, boy, go it! I'll keep them from shooting!"

TURK ran through the line of men, too, and faced around, defying them. But they weren't defied long; their eyes went past him in admiration to the black stallion. For the glossy animal, through the gate and into the road, was running, neck arched, tail flagged, the picture of a live thing turned free.

The men crowded to the fence by the shed the better to see. Townsend's boot struck the pitchfork. He stared at it, picked it up, ejaculated, and pointed to blood and a tuft of black hair on one tine.

"Hilliard was fighting Midnight with that!" cried Turk. "Can you blame the horse?"

Once more the officer regarded Turk steadily.

"For my part," Townsend said at last, "I withdraw the death sentence—eh, how about it, men?"

"Well, o' course—" hesitated Pegleg.

"Fine!" Townsend caught him up. "Hear that, Turk? Your horse is acquitted. You can own him in safety now."

Every eye turned back to the stallion, off there in the road. Suddenly he left the road and jumped the barb-wire fence in a long, clean leap. Nothing intervened then between him and the distant Rimrock but another fence or two. He laid to the ground. He sped. He slackened. He cavorted, arching. Sped on again, mane blowing, tail flowing in a streamline, a symphony in grace and movement—and freedom.

Sheriff Townsend touched Turk's arm.

"We'll help you run him down, in our cars," he said, "like Hilliard did once. If you want to pen him again."

A wise little smile played around the old sheriff's mouth.

Turk shook his head slowly.

"No," whispered Turk, and his voice was thick. "Let—him go—back home."

And to keep the men from witnessing his emotions he stalked away, down through the corral pens to where his saddle horse patiently waited.

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"NEVER PROD A TEXICAN!"

By BART CASSIDY

Texas Tim McKay trailed his vanished partner to the ghost-town of Bartlett —where a stranger's questions received .45 calibre answer.

TIM McKAY blew a long ribbon of smoke from his nose and watched the big stranger on the roan horse through the rising swirl of it. His lazy gray eyes showed no hint of emotion but his nerves were alive with the certainty that he was face to face with death.

"These sandy winds set a man's teeth on edge," the big man said, "and I never seen the time they wasn't blowing across the rims."

"It's sure apt to be gusty up here," McKay agreed. He saw the stranger's eyes flick down for an instant to the brand on his horse's flank.

"I done a fool thing," the man said and shrugged deprecatingly. "I done an awful fool thing. I come off without any matches and I'm wanting a smoke. Maybe you could spare me a few?"

"Sure," Tim McKay said. He shifted his boots a little in the stirrups until his weight rested wholly on the balls of his feet. He stood and leaned forward a little as he reached into the pocket of his jeans.

"That'll be a help." The man grinned, moving his horse in close.

Tim McKay flung himself back as the stranger's six-gun came smashing down in a vicious overhand blow. The weapon glanced from his chest with a numbing impact and exploded with a blasting roar as it struck the saddle horn.

As the two horses lunged apart, McKay seized the wrist of the extended gun-arm with his left hand, clamped his right elbow around his attacker's neck and kicked free of the saddle. The two men crashed to earth between the terrified horses.

The shock of the impact sickened McKay for an instant but he held his grip and worked his head and body in close to avoid the mauling of the assassin's free left hand.

Twice more the Colt's gun boomed as the killer tried to bring the muzzle around, but each time McKay forced it wide. And as he did so, he slipped his neck hold until his right hand was under the other man's chin—until he could force his stiffened thumb murderously into the neck glands under the turn of the jaw.

With a strangled snarl of pain, the man dropped his gun in an effort to bring both hands to the relieving of the pain. And in that instant Tim McKay rolled free, jerked to his feet, and kicked the dropped gun out of reach over the rim.

The big man got sullenly to his feet, one hand at his throat, the other on his empty gun-sheath. When he saw that McKay was making no move to draw his own weapon, he charged with a bellow of fury.

McKay went in through the big man's wild flinging style with bone-wrenching, savage blows that snapped the assassin's head cruelly back. Then a terrific right, blasting out from the shoulder, hurled the attacker down loose and unconscious, a dozen feet away.

McKay's breath was labored, and a dull pain in his chest filled him with fury when he went to turn the inert form over with the toe of his boot.

"I hope your damn jaw is broke," he said grimly, "I hope it's busted all to hell!"

HE stood for a time in thought, and there was sombre trouble in Tim McKay's eyes as he surveyed the vastness of the country that lay beyond the rim. The gray of sage stretched away until the bottomless blue of distance fused the detail to nothing; and beyond that nothing, weird, half-visible mountains raised their ghostly heads to mark the northern rim of the Malabeau country. At length his gaze came back to rest on the town of Bartlett, sprawling along the base of the rim a mile to the west.

"The answer must be here," McKay said softly. "There must be something

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"They pumped me about the money Steve was packing, and I told 'em there had been better than two thousand sewed in the lining of his coat. . . ."

here that I missed. The trail is plain as day this far." He counted unconsciously on his fingers: "Steve left Texas on the third of August and he was in Steptoe on the sixth. Then he came straight south across the Malabeau as steady as a clock: Avery's—Aspen Springs—Sheep Camp and Bartlett. A day for each step as regular as if he was packing the mail. Steve got here on the night of the tenth and should have been to Turner's ranch sometime on the eleventh—but he wasn't! And there's no small thing to show that the eleventh ever existed. A trail so easy a kid could follow it, ends here in nothing. Wiped out like a snake track in the rain!"

McKay's eyes came back to the man he had smashed down, and he nodded again to himself. Yes, the answer *must* be here. He said aloud: "My horse wears the same brand that Steve's wore. But whether you're in this thing, Mister Bushwhacker, or only figured to rob me, I think I'll just leave you lay. I don't know any of the law-men in this country and I reckon I'd call a lot of attention to myself if I was to take you in and bring charges against you."

With his decision once made, McKay caught his horse, mounted up and rode swiftly down the trail toward the town.

Bartlett had boomed once—had been a town of five thousand. But the ore load

had pinched out in one mine after another and the tide of population had ebbed again to a bare four hundred. Although it still remained the county seat, nothing was left of its old prosperity but the black-mouthed shafts and the weathered earth of their dumps.

McKay rode at a shambling trot through the lower end of the town where the houses were bleakly deserted, doors gone or sagging, glassless windows staring emptily into the street.

Then he came to the wash that separated the living part of Bartlett from the abandoned. The hoofs of his horse, booming on the planks of the bridge, announced his coming in the thin cool air of evening.

Before the combined blacksmith shop and stable he halted, stepped down from the saddle.

The stableman came from the darkened interior and nodded a greeting. He was a thin little man with a ragged mustache and a habitual squint to his pale blue eyes.

"He won't need a rub," McKay said, "but give him oats and bed him down good."

The little man nodded in agreement.

When he offered no word, McKay said: "I'll pay now in case I ride early."

"It'll be a dollar. I'll leave him in the end stall here." The liveryman took the money and started away. Then he hesitated and swung back to survey the long range-hardened length of Tim McKay. "Did you find your man?"

Something in the studied carelessness of the question jerked McKay's full attention, warned of some hidden importance here.

"No, I didn't come up with him. Must have slipped his trail some place. But while I was back here I figured to check again with you." McKay kept his voice even.

"There's nothing more to tell," the man said. "I told you what there was."

Tim caught a reluctance in his tone and said soothingly, "Sure, I know. It's just that I was in such a lather to be on the move when I came through here night before last, that I mightn't have got it straight. You're sure that this fellow was here on the tenth of August?"

"I ain't sure that the man you want was ever here," the stableman grunted, "all I said was that a little short guy that limped on his left leg come in here that night riding a horse with the same 2-M brand that yours has got."

"All right," Tim said, "all right. But would you mind telling how it is that you remember all the details about a man you only got a couple of looks at six weeks ago?"

The stableman turned full around then and fixed McKay with a hostile eye.

"Well, if you want to know, one reason is that he pulled it low down on me! He came back here in the night, got his horse, and pulled out without paying his bill!"

McKay felt a quick tensing of the nerves but he held the eagerness from his voice: "What time did he come back here for his horse?"

"If I knew that I'd collected my pay. He come back when nobody was here."

"Sure," said Tim. "Sure, I didn't think of that." He took a dollar from his pocket and gave it to the little man. "Here, I'll stand for my friend's bill. We don't want to leave any loose ends."

THE stableman took the money and dropped it into his pocket. He shifted nervously, half turned again toward the back of the stable.

Tim McKay took tobacco and papers from his pocket and rolled a smoke. After a little he said mildly, "You say that his running out was *one* reason? There was something else maybe?"

"No," the little man said reluctantly. "No, that was all. At the time. I thought there might be something else but I was wrong."

Tim inspected the fire of his smoke for a moment in silence then looked up again at the other man. "It most likely don't matter," he said musingly, "but just for the luck of it, let's have a look at this other thing. What was it you were wrong about?"

"I told you it didn't come to nothing," the stableman denied. "We all make mistakes I reckon."

"Get on to it," McKay said impatiently. "Get it said!"

"Well, I went to the sheriff—but he showed me where I was wrong and never done nothing about it."

"Wrong about what?" Tim McKay de-

manded. "You don't mean the dollar you'd lost."

"No," the little man blurted, "not the dollar. I wouldn't bother the sheriff about that. But this fellow gave me plenty of reason to be suspicious of him the way he came in the night for his horse and took the wrong saddle and all. . . . I thought he might be the man they wanted for what had happened in town that night."

McKay threw down his smoke and ground it viciously in the dirt. "So," he said harshly, "you missed telling me that you've still got Steve Margason's saddle here!"

"The saddle is mine," the stableman said stubbornly. "I'm keeping it to take the place of the one he took. I never told you about it because I didn't want no row!"

"All right," Tim said. "We'll skip that for now. Let's get on to the rest of it—or am I going to have to kick it out of you? What happened in town that night?"

The man took a step back before the menace in McKay's tone.

"I thought you knew," he squeaked. "It didn't concern your friend but I thought you knew. . . . There was a man shot to death in the street about nine-thirty on the night of August tenth!"

McKay was still for a time, his face giving no hint of his thoughts, his big hands hanging limp at his sides.

Two men came down the street and stopped by the door, stood looking from the brighter light of the street into the gloom of the stable. Their gaze licked across McKay and his horse, came to rest on the stableman.

"Evening, Cole," one of them said softly.

"Hello, Lewis," the little man said, and McKay noted the strain in his voice.

The two men didn't look at Tim McKay again. They crossed over to hunker down just outside the door. The one who had spoken, drew the four crossed lines of a tit-tat-toe game in the dust. He marked the center square with a circle.

"It's your move, Roberts," he said.

"Sure." The other grunted and marked a corner with a stubby forefinger.

The stableman, Cole, stood stiffly watching them for a moment. He jerked his hand across his mouth and his eyes flicked back to McKay for a bare second.

Outside, the man Lewis said: "I guess the cat gets this game." He smoothed out the marks with the side of a broken shingle and drew another frame.

"Water the horse good before he gets his oats," Tim McKay said. At the door, he stepped around the lines of the tit-tat-toe game and went down the street.

AFTER two blocks, Tim McKay cut through into an alley that went up the hill to the left. That alley led him, after a time, away from the buildings and into the scattering junipers at the edge of town.

A half acre of ground was squared off here by the remains of a leaning and battered fence, beyond which the yarrow weeds and bronco grass grew undisturbed among the headboards of Bartlett's dead.

The last of the swift desert twilight was fading when McKay went through the fence and up into the thick of a juniper clump where the broken red earth marked a recent grave.

He stopped at the foot of the mound for a little. He was conscious of the shrill ringing song of the crickets in the grass around, and far off to the north, a coyote pealed his mad-house bark.

Tim McKay's face was drawn, harsh, but after a moment he shook off his dread unwillingness and went forward to hunt out the letters on the headboard. They were brief and simple but McKay read them twice before he rocked back on his heels. Burned into the plank was the name Joe Smith; the date August tenth and the year.

"I wonder," Tim said softly. "I wonder—"

His thoughts were bitten off short and his right hand dropped to the handle of his gun as he went forward again to the shelter of the headboard. The shadow of a man had shifted by the nearer of the junipers.

Then the tensely held breath exploded from Tim McKay's lungs as a dry, peevish voice said: "If you're through communin' with the spirits, you might give some heed to the living."

"Hell!" Tim exploded. He got to his feet. "If it ain't Old Man French having him a game of hide-and-seek with the spooks. I had it in my mind that you were

over Round Mountain way hunting cats."

He went in under the trees to join a lank, weathered old man who leaned against a juniper with one moccasined foot drawn up against the trunk.

"I was," French said gruffly. "I was hunting cats and having me a large time until I began to hear words and rumors that I couldn't make sense out of. So I gave the felines a holiday and lit out over to yours and Steve's diggings to see what the smell was about."

"Yes," Tim said flatly. "Folks had begun to talk but I'd be the last one to hear much about it."

"The talking was mostly hinting," Old Man French said. "Anyway, I got to the 2-M a couple of days after you'd left and lit out on your trail. I gained one day on you and got in here last night."

Tim McKay was silent for a moment. Then he jerked his head toward the new grave and said: "Was it this that held you over?"

"Partly," the old man admitted. "I likewise run into a Modoc horse wrangler that told me Steve never showed up at Turner's ranch, so I reckoned you'd backtrack yourself and get in here sometime this evening. I also made it a guess that you'd pick up something about that shooting on the tenth and come out here to check up on the name and the date rather than go around asking questions."

"You're too crafty," Tim grunted. "Maybe you can tell me about this Joe Smith here?"

"Don't get jumpy," French said. "I rode the better part of half way across Texas to ask you some questions and I don't aim to be put off. How about Steve?"

"All right," Tim agreed. "I'll give you that. Steve left Steptoe for Turner's ranch on the third of August. He was to have bought about a hundred head of horses and run 'em back north with some Indian wranglers picked up here. That's just about all there is to his story so far."

"It ain't quite all," French pointed out.

"All right," Tim said. "All right! He was packing about two thousand dollars in cash with him. Five hundred of it was ours and the rest was Judge Harvey's. Steve was to use his own judgment and buy horses on commission."

Old Man French spat thoughtfully. "That's about what I pieced together. And now folks are beginning to hint that Steve has flew the coop?"

"Listen," Tim McKay said harshly. "Listen—I got a whiff of what they were hinting although people were damn careful what they said in front of me. But you know damn well that Steve Margason wouldn't skip the country with two dollars or two million!"

"Keep your shirt on," French said gruffly. "You don't have to convince me of nothing."

"I don't have to convince you, but I'm going to bust this thing wide open and make damn sure that there's no stink hooked onto Steve's name!"

"Take it easy, son," the old man advised, "don't get way out ahead of yourself. You're figuring that maybe Steve is—" He jerked his head toward the grave.

"Joe Smith is a name they could give to anybody," Tim said heavily. "And the date is August tenth."

"DON'T think I missed that," French told him. "It was the first thing that got into my mind. But I bought a few drinks around, and got a couple of loose mouths to talking, and Joe Smith was the name of the gent that got polished off that night all right. He's resting under the dirt yonder. He was an old miner that had been here since the boom days—made his living hunting pockets in one deserted mine or another. They've got a fellow by the name of Clark in jail for killing him, and they've got two witnesses that claim they saw this Clark shoot Smith down in a drunken rage. All around, it looks air-tight."

"What the hell!" Tim McKay said. "Are you asking me to believe that these things ain't hooked up? That this killing has nothing to do with Steve's dropping from sight?"

"I ain't asking you to believe that," French pointed out. "I'm just showing you what we got to go on. But I'll tell you this and ask you to believe it: If there's an outfit in this town that knew Steve had that money and downed him for it, they'll wipe you out like a light if you go to crowding them. And they'll

spot you quick enough. Steve was riding a horse with the same 2-M as yours wasn't he?"

McKay shrugged.

"I already been spotted so often it ain't fun any more," he said dryly. "First a plumb stranger had to get a beating for himself by trying to lay me out up on the rim-rock. And I hadn't been in town five minutes before a couple of slippery looking tit-tat-toe players had me all staked and claimed!"

"I'm beginning to be glad I came," Old Man French said owlishly. "This thing stands to be a nice change from the peaceful business of lion hunting."

"It ain't apt to be so different," McKay said, "only we got a cold trail to work. Who are these witnesses that saw Joe Smith killed?"

"I found that out all right," French grunted. "They're a couple of local lads —Roberts and Lewis are the names. You figuring to look 'em up and check things?"

McKay stood for a long moment in silence, the hair tingling along the back of his neck.

"I don't guess I'll have to," he said at last. "They're a whole lot more apt to look me up. Those two are my tit-tat-toe players!"

French whistled. "Well, I guess that hooks these things up all right. How'd you come to run into those jaspers?"

"I was pumping that little runt Cole that runs the livery stable," McKay said. "I'd just got him to admit that Steve's horse had been taken out sometime in the night with the wrong saddle—that he still had Steve's there—when these lads came in. Cole shut up tight and looked plenty scared. I didn't see just where those two came in, but I could easy see that more questions were out of order so I put off checking up on the saddle and came up here. The name of the man that had been killed on the tenth of August looked awful big to me right then."

"All right," French said. "But hooking these two things up still don't give us a whole lot to go on. What move you figuring to make now?"

"Well, it's like you say—we got mighty little to go on. I don't see all the angles in this thing yet, but it stands to reason that with everything all spraddled out like this, somebody must have left some loose ends. I aim to project around some and see can I stumble onto anything. They've already got me spotted, and if they want to crowd their play it might be as good a beginning as any."

Old Man French straightened away from the tree and hitched the belt that suspended his ancient single-action revolver.

"There ain't anybody knows I'm in this thing yet, which is how-come I waited for you out here. I'll find excuse to check up on that saddle Cole has—that might amount to something. After that I'll circulate around and look drunk. You better not know me, but I won't be far off if hell busts!"

"Last time I was here," Tim said, "I ate at the Desert Café. I'll go there now and stoke up. If my tit-tat-toe players want me, I'll be easy to find."

"Well, play it close to your shirt and don't let anybody get behind you," French advised.

"Sure," Tim McKay said. He went down across the graveyard and struck a weed-grown lane that led into town.

THE crickets had stilled their song before the sharp cold of the desert night, and the pungent scent of yarrow weeds hung heavy in the draftless darkness. Ahead of Tim McKay, a bunch of lights marked the center of town, but these were cut from view as he came by the bulk of a long mine-shed to the right of the lane. To the left, the skeleton frame of a dump track reared against the low-hung stars.

The tramp of his boots on the gravel echoed loudly from the face of the shed wall. It was as though some invisible walker flanked him in the dark. He felt a stiffening of muscles that was not from the cold. His hand dropped to the butt of his gun.

Crunch—crunch—crunch. The sound of his steps gritted steadily back. Then he stepped from the gravel of the lane into the grass and stopped. And from behind there was one last footstep that was no echo of his!

While five seconds went by Tim McKay was still, listening. Then he moved on again keeping to the quiet of the grass. After a dozen steps he made the shelter of the dump scaffolding and dropped to

hands and knees. His hands sought and found a small stone which he tossed ahead. It landed with a soft thud fifty feet down the lane, and almost at once the sound of cautious footsteps started again.

McKay repeated his deception with another stone. A moment later, he saw a form—only a darker shadow in the night—glide by.

For a time McKay crouched close to the ground, gun in hand. Then a grim smile tugged at his lips as another shadow drifted by. This one oozed along without so much as a sound, and with its passing Tim McKay knew a pull of warmth at his heart. This last silent form would be Old Man French stalking the stalker, double-checking the play.

McKay waited five minutes, then crossed under the framework of the dump tracks and cut into the main street of town. He went in the Desert Café and sat down at a table by the rear wall.

There was some dozen men in the place, most of them lined along the bar to the right of the front door. McKay let his eyes shift around casually but he found no face that he knew.

From the Chinaman who ran the place, he ordered ham and eggs; when they were brought, he set himself to eating them.

The street door opened and the two tit-tat-toe players came in. They gave no slight attention to McKay but sat down at a table well across the room from his. Over his food Tim appraised them squarely, got the details he had missed in the poor light of the street.

What he saw made him thoughtful.

Lewis was a bigger man than he had first appeared. Tall and lean but with a solidness, too; and Tim read power in his wide, slightly stooped shoulders. Roberts was shorter and thicker with a wide flat face set with small, emotionless eyes.

There seemed little about them to mark them from hundreds of hard men who rode the rim country, but Tim McKay knew a grim certainty that these were at least two of the men with whom he must cope in the clearing of Steve Margason's name. And he knew, too, that neither of them would think more of rubbing out a life than of finishing the cups of coffee they had just ordered.

McKay had finished his eggs and started on his pie when the back door jerked open and Old Man French came in. The cat-hunter stood for a moment just inside the door letting his eyes get used to the light and swaying slightly on his feet. His stance and expression were those of a man more often drunk than sober, and his motions those of one used to getting his ideas through an alcoholic haze.

Tim glanced up briefly at him and went back to his food.

French surveyed the room with a roving eye and then set a course toward the bar. His slightly unsteady way took him between McKay and the wall, and as he passed his shoulder brushed Tim's hat from a peg to the floor.

"'Scuse me," he said thickly. When Tim looked up in irritation he repeated, "'Scuse me," and stooped to pick up the hat. But he lost his balance, and in saving himself his foot came down heavily on the crown of the Stetson, crushing it flat.

"Say!" Tim said angrily. "What the hell! You tryin' to be funny?"

There was a ripple of laughter in the room.

French said, "Ne'mind—don't get sore." He managed to pick the hat up then and started to straighten it with fumbling fingers.

"Oh, hell," Tim said in disgust and took it from him.

"Say, listen," French protested then. "Don't need to get sore—accidents will happen."

"Get on your way," Tim snapped. "Get movin'!"

Old Man French went on over to the bar then. McKay gave a last straightening pat to his Stetson, took the folded slip of paper from the crown, and tossed the hat back onto the wall peg.

He made a cigarette to smoke with his coffee and rocked back at ease in his chair. After a time, when he felt Roberts' and Lewis' eyes upon him, he took a letter from the inside pocket of his coat as though he would re-read its contents. When he opened it out, he spread Old Man French's note across it. And for the second time that night, the hackle hairs rose along the back of his neck.

In the old lion hunter's crabbed and careful hand the note said:

Keep your shirt-tail tucked in tight. I picked up a loose end all right and it looks as if we'd been sucked into something plenty big.

That was Steve's saddle fair enough and the two thousand dollars was still laced into the bucking rolls! Steve must have stumbled onto something by accident and whoever got him couldn't have known about or been after the money.

And that roll is our one chance to find what they did with him. I'll come over there in a little and pick a fight with you. You throw me out into the street and be plenty rough about it.

After that you sit tight and don't be too fast to follow the second guy out of the place.

Tim McKay took a drink of his coffee, folded the letter and put it away.

OVER at the bar Old Man French was having another drink and getting noisy. At last his squinted eyes shifted around and came to rest on Tim McKay.

"Don't have to get sore just 'cause I knocked your hat down!" he shouted. When Tim paid him no heed he weaved across the room to stand glaring down at the younger man.

"All right," Tim said. "All right, forget it!"

French rocked back on his heels and his face worked with anger.

"I 'pologized didn't I? That ought to be 'nuff!" His voice was the high quarrelsome squeak of a drunk. "Listen you young pup, I got you spotted and you don't have to be so high and mighty. You ain't so much! You're McKay, from over beyond Steptoe—the guy whose partner skipped out with a roll of somebody else's money!"

"Say, you damned old soak," Tim said harshly, "you keep your mouth shut! You hear?"

Old Man French gave vent to a shrill of laughter. "I don't have to keep my mouth shut. Over Round Mountain way it's said around common that your partner cleared out with plenty of cash, and now I bet-cha you come up here to meet him and get your cut of it!"

"You damned old buzzard!" Tim snarled, and sprang up to seize French by the front of his shirt.

The old hunter went for his gun then, but he was slow and fumbling. Tim took it from him, shook the loads out on the floor and crammed it back in its sheath. With the same motion he spun the old lion hunter around, caught the collar of his coat and the seat of his pants and propelled him at a run across the room.

French cursed and threatened as he went but Tim McKay shoved him through the swinging doors and kicked him into the street.

Some of the men at the bar were laughing when Tim went back to his table, but he merely ordered another drink, gave them no heed.

After a little he suppressed a smile of elation when Lewis and Roberts got up, paid their bill and went out. McKay fought a desire to follow them. After a moment he made himself go over to the bar for a drink with which to pass the time.

Ten minutes went by. . . . The door opened and Lewis returned, and with his coming, Tim McKay settled down to wait. Whatever the end of this thing was to be, that end was crowding in close at hand. He was certain of that.

The moments dragged by. Fifteen—twenty—twenty-five. . . . Without looking up from his glass, McKay could tell the restlessness of the man who had come to watch him. When half an hour was gone, Lewis got suddenly up and stamped out into the street.

Tim McKay's heart beat hard against his ribs, but he held grimly to the old lion hunter's orders. Lewis might well stop outside to watch and see if he were in the clear. Watching his book steadily, McKay counted fifty and then got up. In the poorly lighted street he saw a figure, a block away, turn down an alley.

The soft dust muffled his footsteps as he broke into a run. In a matter of seconds he was at the corner when the man had vanished into the side street.

There was no light in the narrow way. To McKay's eyes, still new to the darkness, it looked as black as a tunnel. But the scent of freshly stirred dust was in his nostrils and he started forward cautiously. He had gone but a dozen steps when French's whisper stopped him in his tracks.

"All right—no hurry! I know right where he's going and his eyes ain't used to the dark no more than yourn."

The old hunter took McKay's arm to guide him. As they went down the alley the older man said softly:

"It worked like a charm so far. They

thought I was all worked up and they come out to see could they stir me into gunning you. At the same time they pumped me about the money Steve was packing, and I told 'em that folks claimed there had been better than two thousand sewed into the lining of his coat. Then I played dead drunk, and like I figured one of 'em stayed to watch you while the other went off to go through Steve's clothes."

McKay felt the cold hand of dread take his heart. Between stiff lips, he gritted: "Well—?"

"It stood to reason they'd use some old mine to—to put him in." Old Man French's voice shook with fury. "I followed Roberts to find out which one it was. When I made that out, I cat-footed up on him and busted him down with the barrel of my gun. I reckoned when he didn't come back Lewis would strike out for a check-up, thinking he'd been double-crossed!"

THEY had come close in under the rim, away from the center of town. McKay's eyes were becoming better used to the darkness and he could make out the dark shapes of some old mine buildings.

"That's the one right there," French pointed out. "We'll wait a little right here. The shaft goes into the hill from that and he can't get away. When he gets in a way, he'll likely go to striking matches and that'll help us."

Tim McKay was still fighting for control of the rage that burned within him. Trying to get his mind ready for the thing that was working itself out here before him—trying to get it set to accept the fact that the end of the trail was close. The trail that had started nine years before in a cow-camp where he and Steve Margason had first met. The trail that had led through the wild days of Texas round-ups, through the high-flung days of youth and at last into the steady work and ambition of the 2-M partnership.

Old Man French, as though knowing the thoughts that were in Tim's heart, said no word. But after a time laid a soothing hand on his companion's arm.

"Shall we go?" Tim demanded flatly.

"The weasel's gone into his hole," the old lion hunter said. "Let's finish this now."

With no other word they went ahead into the shack and felt their way along the car tracks into the tunnel. Tim McKay followed the left wall and French the right so that they might miss no side drift.

Then Tim caught the gleam of a light against the wall fifty feet away. The touch of French's hand on his arm told that the lion hunter, too, had seen. The next moment, they were going down the drift side by side, guns drawn and ready. The light came from a cross tunnel. As they came closer, the shadow of a moving man danced grotesquely across the wall.

Tim McKay drew the hammer of his gun back.

As though in answer to some unspoken request, Old Man French drew a little to one side so that Tim might settle this score that was his own. And at that same second a tiny gleam of light flashed across the smooth of a gun-barrel ahead. Tim lashed out to jerk French with him to the floor.

As they hit the rock the deafening roar of a shotgun bellowed and the red spray of its flame leaped out.

Tim McKay fired twice under the flash, and there came a strangled cry in the voice of the man McKay had fought on the rim-rock:

"Damn you, Lewis, I told you I heard somebody!"

In the rock-walled tomb, the bedlam of guns and wild cries mingled in an uncanny din. A figure hurled itself from the side tunnel, shooting on the move. For an instant it was framed against the yellow light from the side drift, and in that instant both Tim and Old Man French fired.

The weight of the slugs stopped Lewis and hurled him backward. The gun in his hand crashed once more after he hit the dirt, the bullet glancing and screaming away down the rocky tunnel.

In the silence that followed, French sneezed from the acrid smell of burned powder.

"If you can still sneeze, I guess you're all right," McKay said.

"I'd be better but for the lick you fetched me," French complained. "You don't need to kill a man to save his life!"

"I might have known it was you guys," a dry voice observed from around the

corner. "It's just your way to come shooting up a feller's happy home."

THE tunnel spun for a second before Tim McKay's eyes. Then he shook his head clear and stepped around the bend into the light. A crude gate made of iron pipe blocked off the drift there, and beyond the gate, in the light of the kerosene lantern, was a bow-legged little man whose clothes hung to him in rags, whose beard and hair were matted with mud.

"Nice place you got here, Steve," Tim McKay said with studied carelessness.

"Glad you like it," Steve Margason said gravely. "There are a few things that might be better—lighting and ventilation and all—but then a home is a home."

Old Man French glanced from one partner to the other, and to cover the embarrassment of their emotion he said grumpily: "Well, let's not stay here forever—this underground damp will give me rheumatism in my joints."

"You take *me* now," Steve said. "I'm willing to go but this door here still interferes with my rights of egress. The key is by the lantern there where Lewis dropped it."

"I ought to leave you here—the trouble you been," Tim said. "Always could get into more trouble than quicksand."

"While you're fumbling with that lock," Steve Margason told him, "you might explain how you come to find me after all these years."

"It's been six weeks," Tim grunted. "We just gathered up a few loose ends."

"How about my saddle," Steve demanded eagerly. "You find that? They had to get rid of my horse and I couldn't fool 'em there, but I lied to 'em about which saddle was mine. I thought that might be something for you to work on."

"Yes," French snapped, "we found it and the cash was still there. That's a reckless way to carry a lot of money."

"There's no safer way," Steve defended. "If I hadn't done that, these jaspers would have had it spent by now!"

French grunted. "Anyway, finding that money was the first hunch we had that this was anything but plain robbery. What kind of a waltz-me-around-again-willie did you git mixed up in?"

"Shucks—" Steve Margason came out through the opened doorway—"it was trying to go to bed early that got me in trouble. Nobody should ever go to bed the same day he gets up! I was headed for the hotel about nine-thirty or so and I run onto a killing. It looked like plain murder to me and I tried to help the old fellow out but I got busted down from behind. When I came too, I was here. And Lewis and Big Nig—with the shotgun there—were trying to decide what to do with me. There was another guy, too—Roberts—"

"Sure," French grunted, "he's fixed."

"All right," Steve went on. "It seems they had killed this old Smith and framed it onto a guy by the name of Clark—doped him and all—and then I happened along and saw too much. They decided that they'd have to rub me out to keep me still."

"Why?" Tim demanded impatiently.

"This old mine here," Steve said. "This Joe Smith had been working along and stumbled onto the lost lode. They killed him before he got a chance to tell it and framed it onto Clark that owned a lot of the stock. They figured to pick up the whole thing when Clark had gone to the gallows and make a clean-up!"

"Don't go telling me they kept you here for six weeks because they wanted a fourth at cards," Tim McKay grunted.

"Hell," Steve said and went over to look down at Lewis. "They aimed to rub me out all right but they figured they might as well work me to death. I've dug damn near enough gold to buy the place now. When we get that guy Clark out of jail, I'm putting in for a share of it."

"Let's go," French said, "we can hash the dirt outside. I don't like it here."

The three of them went down along the drift. At the top of the ladder Steve Margason demanded, "What time of day is it outside?"

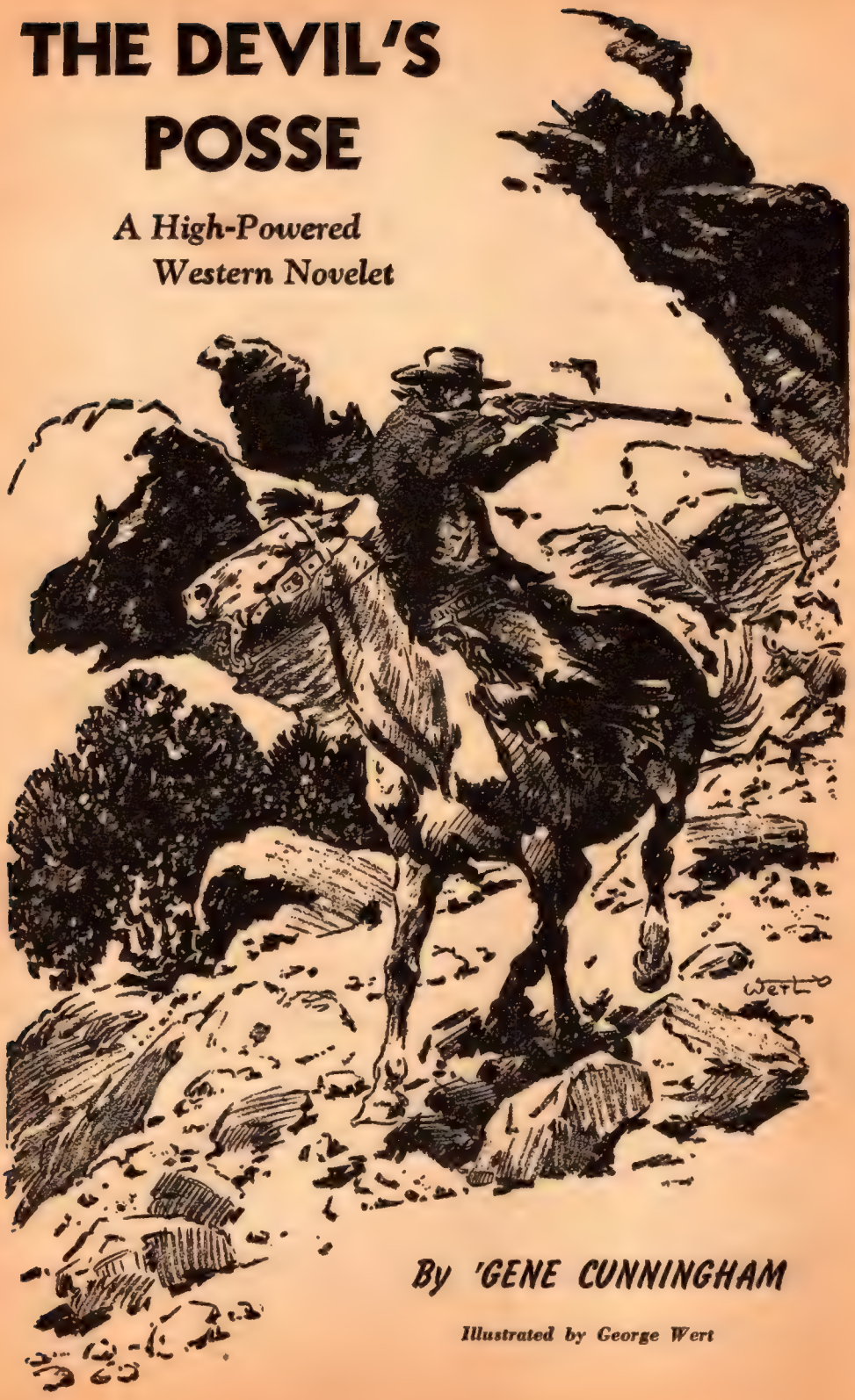
"It's about twelve," Tim told him. "And it ain't day—it's night."

Steve swore disgustedly.

"Now if that ain't just like you guys! After a man has been in a hole like this for six weeks you go and rescue him in the middle of the night when there's no daylight for him to look at!"

THE DEVIL'S POSSE

A High-Powered Western Novelet



By 'GENE CUNNINGHAM

Illustrated by George Wert

Lenoir paid for stolen herds with hired-gun currency, and the law backed his play with hang-ropes. Then half-pint Rannie Losson glimpsed a smile from pretty Claire Donelson—and broke Cradock's unholy combine with roaring guns.

It had come so abruptly, had been executed so flashingly, that the three gaping cowboys were only now pulling their guns.

RANNIE LOSSON hunched deeper in his slicker and tilted his head. The water ran off the brim of his old Stetson. There were yellow lights ahead, showing fuzzy in the downpour of July rain in the town of Cradock. Chopo, the dun pony, looked gravely up and down, snorted, then turned toward the wide gate of a livery corral. Rannie grinned. Chopo was a horse!

"Y' ain't seen a long-coupled, loop-laigged seventh son of a son-of-a-gun around?" he asked the livery-man. "Got one blue eye an' one brown. Two-handed fella at ever'thing but buildin' Durham cigarettes. Rides a dapple-gray thirteen hand Fence-Rail outlaw an'—"

"Ain't seen him," shrugged the livery-man. He stared a shade closely at Rannie's slickered five-and-a-half feet, his shapeless and dripping gray Stetson. Last—and most intently—at Rannie's cheerful gray eyes and lean, mahogany-brown face. "No other corral in town, neither."

"He'll come," Rannie grinned. "Yes, sir! He'll be here with them two remainin' hairs o' his in a braid. Whatfors's a place to eat?"

"Go across the street an' walk up past that biggest saloon. Just beyond you'll

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find a restaurant. Chinaman runs it."

The livery-man nodded solemnly. Rannie nodded, too, with gravity to equal the other's.

"*Milgracias!* Take care o' the li'l' hawse, right, will y'?"

Rannie crossed the street, going toward Cradock's eating-house. He stepped upon the board sidewalk below the Red Front Saloon. A girl came out of a doorway almost at his elbow. She looked, not at him, but toward the saloon's lighted front. Then she turned and stepped upon his feet.

"I beg your pardon!" she said quickly, stepping back.

"Oh, don't do a thing like that!" cried Rannie. "If y' was to want to step on 'em again, it'd be all right!"

She was dusky-haired and somewhat thin of face. Worried-looking, Rannie thought. She looked him full in the face

Then for her, the incident was closed. She stepped back inside the doorway, entering a dimly lit, shabby sort of office. Rannie looked up at the faded sign over the door. Somebody-or-Other, Lawyer. A harsh voice inside asking her something —about her father.

HE was at the counter in the nearby deserted restaurant when she came in. She took off her wet hat—a man's hat, and shabby as Rannie's. Her hair, under the oil-lamps, showed so black that it held blue lights.

"Hey!" the Chinese proprietor-cook-waiter grunted, stabbing out with bony forefinger at the Colt swinging at Rannie's side. "No damn good! Marshal, he catch you, dam' bad. Put you in coop. Hund' dollah. No pack gun in town. You leave him heah. You go out, you git him."

Johnny looked inquiringly at the girl. She was sitting three stools down from him, staring blankly ahead of her at the catsup and sauce bottles on the shelf behind the counter.

"On Long is right," she said, without looking at Rannie. "It's a new ordinance. And Jacks, the marshal, is enforcing it iron-handed. He killed a cowboy last week for refusing to hand over his pistol. One of our Leaning D boys, Tommy, was drunk and loud. Jacks shot him."

Johnny unbuckled his shell-belt and rolled it around the holstered pistol. Inwardly, he grinned. For the mate to that .45 was under his arm in a shoulder-holster. Not for him going naked in a strange town.

They ate their meal without any talk. Rannie asked On Long about Doc Meadows. Not that he believed Doc had hit town, yet. But there was a chance of it. And Doc's short letter had sounded as if the thing he had in his mind needed attention *muy pronto.*

The girl went out ahead of him. Rannie looked at the wrinkled little Chinaman.

"Leanin' D. . . . Now, who owns that outfit?"

"Jim Donelson. *She* Missy Claih Donelson. Fine people. But Jim, he too dam' much suck bottle. No good!"

Rannie got a cigar from him. It was dry as hay and brittle. But he had never smoked one that was not. He drew in a great cloud of smoke luxuriously and loafed out. And Claire Donelson, standing with a man's arm around her, at the corner of the Red Front Saloon, made a strangling sound.

"Ahhh! Come on! You didn't use to be so stand-offish," the man accused. "An' you ain't so stand-offish now with some. Come on over to the office an'—an' talk to me a while. Ought to be a change for you—lookin' at a man!"

"Take your hand away!" she gasped. She sounded mad, rather than afraid, Rannie thought. "You've run with Mexicans so long that you can't understand how *we* look at you!"

"She said take y' hand away!" Rannie explained to the man. He was a hulking figure, a foot taller, probably fifty pounds heavier. But not for Rannie Losson to consider so unimportant a thing as mere size.

The man turned her, so that he could face Rannie, but still held her against him with an arm around her waist. Rannie stepped flashingly in and chopped with hard knuckles, down upon the wrist of the holding hand. The man snarled and let Claire Donelson go. She stepped sidewise and cried out.

"It's Jacks! The marshall! He'll kill you!"

"I'll beat him to death!" Jacks growled.

He came in a sort of lumbering rush at Rannie, swinging his fists awkwardly. Rannie side-stepped, to the edge of the saloon's porch.

JACKS whirled and rushed after him. He sounded like an animal, snarling underbreath.

Rannie caught hold of one of the posts that held up the wooden porch-roof. He lifted himself and kicked out savagely.

His boot-toes landed, one to the neck, the other to the chin. The marshal dropped to one knee. As Rannie's feet came down to the planks again, Jacks got drunkenly to his feet. Rannie sprang at him. He brushed aside the vague swings of the marshal. He hit like a pile-driver, short, terrific smashes to the body. Jacks' knees sagged.

Rannie shifted his attack to the face. He drove the marshal backward off the porch, out into the muddy street.

Jacks seemed out on his feet, but unable to fall. And he took slashing punishment for standing up. Rannie hit him at will, without a return. And he sent him crumbling to the mud at last. He looked down at the moveless figure for an instant, then went briskly back to the porch. Here he stopped, to stare blankly. For Claire Donelson was gone.

"Well!" he grinned. "That's that! An' now I better be gittin' plumb out o' sight!"

He picked up his dropped slicker, put it on and ran down the side of the saloon. He came quietly in at the back door, without causing any eyes to turn his way. A vacant chair showed in a stud-game. He slid into it, still slickered.

Minutes passed. Then the swinging doors crashed back. In them stood a terrible figure, a gun hanging loosely in each big hand. Out of swollen, bloody lids, black eyes shone insanely. The cowboy sitting on Rannie's left hand looked up mechanically, stiffened and called softly upon his Maker. Rannie looked first at the cowboy, with elaborate curiosity, then at the marshal. Then back at the cowboy, blue eyes very, very wide and innocent:

"He looks like somebody'd worked him over, all right," he remarked thoughtfully. "Whose bet is it?"

STRAIGHT down the room Jacks came lurching. Rannie hummed under his breath and looked around at the cards showing. His ace-king was high. He bet fifty cents. Out of the corner of his eye he watched the marshal who had stopped, halfway down the room, to glare terribly all around. At last Jacks came on, his breath noisy between swollen lips, the red glint showing in his black eyes.

"You just come in?"

The question seemed to be addressed to all at the stud-table. Rannie chose to ignore it, while he studied a pair of tens showing on the fourth card, across from him. The marshal repeated the question, in ferocious snarl.

"No, sir!" cried the cowboy on Rannie's left. "We all been here quite some time—yes, sir! Wh-what's trouble?"

"Some son sneaked up behind me, outside, a while ago. Hit me when I wasn't lookin'. An' when I lay eyes on him, I—"

Rannie grinned, as he raised the bet of the pair of tens from a dollar to two dollars. He looked up at Jacks:

"Couldn't've been nobody here, Marshal. Ain't a son at the table!"

The marshal glowered at Rannie. "I don't like your looks none. An' when I don't like a fella's looks—"

"What d' y' say, a pair o' tens?" Rannie inquired of the man opposite him. "Oh! Five dollars. Well, now, that's a pile o' money. Five—dollars. Nobody goin' to call him? Well, mebbe y' all older an' wiser'n I am. But if he's got three o' them tens, he's got 'em. But if he ain't—here's y' five an' here's fifteen more, Señor! I have got more curiosity than ary Missoury mule y' ever see."

"Fifteen she is," the rat-faced owner of the pair of tens nodded. "*An'* twenty-five!"

"I can just call that," Rannie nodded. He heard the marshal's whistling breath at his shoulder. But apparently he kept his eyes only on his cards. He slid in the money.

"I had 'em!" the rat-faced man said condescendingly, flipping over his hole-card. "Too bad, huh?"

"Yeh! Here is y' re-ceipt!" Rannie grinned. "Li'l ol' ace-high straight." He raked in the pot and turned negligently, to look for the marshal. But Jacks was gone.

Two hands were played, of which

Rannie won one. A third hand was begun when a young man came in through the swinging doors. Mechanically, Rannie watched him. He was an inch or so under six feet. He was dark and well-built, good-looking, very well-dressed, as was apparent when he unsnapped his slicker and looked about the room. A very serious young man by disposition, Rannie decided.

Down the room he came quickly, to stop beside Donelson. The old rancher, leaning with one elbow on the bar, grinned drunkenly at sight of the young man.

"Hi! Cephas! M-h-how's tricks, son? Have a drink!"

"Come on with me, now, Mr. Donelson. You had plenty, already. An' Claire's waitin'. She's worried."

"Claire's good girl," Donelson said thickly. "Ain't worryin'. Dam' if I know who started that tale. She ain't worryin'. I be comin' pre' soon. Yes, sir! Pre' soon, Cephas. Have a drink! I'm goin' have one. You have one, too!"

Cephas argued, but Donelson had reached the good-humoredly obstinate stage. He clung grinning to the bar. He would not be persuaded. And from the back came Jacks again. He walked up to Donelson. Cephas stared at him, with black brows drawn together. Sight of the marshal seemed to worry him, Rannie noted.

"Drunk again, are you, Donelson?" Jacks growled. "All right! I'll put you where you won't make a hog-show no more tonight! I'm sick an' tired o' you comin' in—"

"I'll take care o' him, Mr. Jacks," Cephas interrupted. His face was paper-white. His hand shook as he lifted it to Donelson's arm. "There's no sense to arrestin' the ol' man. You know he ain't got money to be payin' a fine."

Rannie threw in his hand and watched the three. So did the cowboy who had given him the good advice. He was scowling now.

"I seem to smell somethin' not just ordinary," Rannie murmured in the cowboy's ear. "What's the layout? Is the marshal pinchin' Donelson because o' the girl? Or is it somethin' even nastier?"

"Yeh," the cowboy muttered, without taking his eyes from the argument. "This whole dam' ring, here, is a-sidin' with Charley Lenoir. An' Lenoir —he's Slash-L owner—is a-houndin' ol' Donelson to sell out for a dime on the big dollar. Cattle-King—that's what Lenoir aims to be. What he ain't done in this Cradock country could be printed in a mighty little Sunday School book. What he has done, to small-spread ranchers would make the ol' Devil grin. My notion is, this is Lenoir's work. I seen him in town this afternoon. An' he grinned when he seen Donelson an' Claire ride in. Hell! I bet it's about the mortgage!"

"Who's the fella augurin' with Jacks? Cephas?"

"Cephas Kinne. Cowman, he calls hisself. One o' them won't-drink-or-smoke boys. But with the ladies—well, they do tell some funny tales about him an' Claire Donelson."

"You go on out o' this, Kinne!" Jacks said grimly at this moment. "You're interferin' with an off'cer. An' it ain't the first time you've gave trouble in town."

"This is a rotten frame-up!" Kinne exploded. "Right here in the Red Front, this minute, there's six drunk men. But you come tyin' into Donelson. An' you know why you're pickin' on him—tonight! You got your orders from—"

JACKS struck him in the face. Kinne reeled backward, and Jacks rushed after him—as he had rushed Rannie Losson. But Kinne was as clumsy on his high heels as Jacks himself. The marshal lashed out with both fists. One landed on Kinne's nose. The blood gushed, and Kinne flung up both hands to cover his face. Jacks' battered mouth twisted in a demoniac snarl, followed him, beating him in the body and upon the arms. He drove him up the room.

Rannie came to his feet and kicked his chair from behind him. He crossed to the bar in a cat-quick rush. He caught the gaping Donelson by the shoulder and wrist. He jerked the old man's right hand up behind his back, spun him and ran him out through the back door. He looked over his shoulder as they half-fell over the threshold. Everyone—save those at the stud-table—was watching Jacks, who had not yet turned from hammering Kinne.

Behind the building that adjoined the Red Front was an open-side shed of Mexican style—merely a roof of poles and

'dobe dirt. Under it, silhouetted by lights from back-windows, stood a buckboard with team harnessed.

Putting two-and-two together, Rannie guessed that it was the Donelsons' buckboard. For they had driven into town, that cowboy had said. And it was in the lawyer's office that Claire Donelson had waited for her father—the office in the building to which this shed seemed to belong. Anyway, he had to get Donelson out of Jacks' sight, if he were going to carry out the impulse that had jerked him from the stud-table.

But Donelson suddenly changed humor. He began to fight, cursing Rannie furiously.

"Turn me loose, dam' yo' impudent soul!" he snarled. "I'm a-goin' back an' kill Jacks! He killed a cowboy o' mine! An' now he's beatin' Kinne to death! Le' me go, or—"

He was a strong man, big-boned and muscular. He wrestled Rannie's lighter weight back and forth. And at any instant Rannie expected the marshal to pop out of the Red Front's back-door. And he would probably come shooting, Rannie thought.

"Y' dam' ol' *tonto!*" he panted.

He jerked the old man off-balance, whirling him. And when Donelson's face was toward him, he lifted himself on his toes and hit Donelson twice, on the point of the chin. The old man swayed and Rannie caught him.

HE stumbled toward the buckboard. There was no time to look back. If Jacks came out—well, he came out! that was all. He dumped the old man in the seat and straightened his big body. And there was a rush of feet. The Colt jumped out of the shoulder-holster in a twinkling loop. He faced the door of the Red Front.

But it was not from the saloon that the running figure came. It was from the back-door of the lawyer's office. And, slickered as she was, now, Rannie recognized Claire Donelson. He let the pistol sag to his side. But he looked from her to the Red Front's back-wall.

"Who— What's the matter? Were you fighting?"

"Nah!" Rannie denied, grinning. "I just had to— It's yo' pa, Miss Claire. He was in the Red Front, an' Cephas Kinne tried to toll him out, like y' ask' him to do. Jacks horned into the deal an' when I run Mr. Donelson outside, Jacks an' Cephas was fightin'. I thought it would be better to git y' pa out o' Jacks sight an'—"

"I don't believe you!" she cried. "Why should you do anything to help the Leaning D? You know you're lying! You're working for Lenoir."

"Yeh? Then I got pay comin' I never know about. I must have my sec'tary make a note to send in our bill to Lenoir, first thing on Toosday. An' now, Miss Donelson, I bid y' a sweet goodnight. An' when Jacks comes a-chargin' out to slam y' pa into the calaboose, give him my love?"

"I— I—" Then she stopped, to dart past him and fumble with her father. He watched, frowning slightly, until he heard a quick-drawn breath that somehow seemed inspired by relief. She came back into the dim shaft of light, back to where Rannie leaned against one of the posts of the shed and whistled unmusically.

"I—I was wrong! I shouldn't have said that. I don't know why you felt moved to help us. But—I thank you. He got away from me, with four hundred dollars, interest on our mortgage. And Lenoir has bought the mortgage. If we fell behind a minute—well! Goodbye, Leaning D!"

"Listen! Y' got to pay over that money, ain't y'? An' it'll take a few minutes? Well! Y' ain't got the minutes to spare—because Jacks is goin' to be huntin' y' pa. An' when he gits him in the jail, lord knows when he'll let him out. Y' want me to drive him out o' town? An' y' can snatch my dun pony out o' the livery corral an' ride after."

"If you would! I'll appreciate it more than I can say! A dun pony? What kind of saddle?"

"Swell fork Myres Special. Got my R.L. stamped on the skirts an' on the saddle-pockets. Winchester in the saddle-scabbard. An' pick up my other .45 at On Long's. Which way to the Leanin' D?"

He scrambled into the buckboard, pushing Donelson over roughly. He gathered up the lines and braced his boot-toes against the iron foot-rest. A line-end cracked like a whip and the buckboard surged out from the shed's cover as the broncs jumped to the gallop in a stride.

From the back-door of the Red Front, Jacks yelled huskily, then opened fire on the runaways. Rannie scooped both lines into left hand. Out of his waistband came the .45 again. He turned in the seat and slammed shots at the saloon's wall. Nor was he particularly careful to try hitting at a distance from the marshal. For this furious firing at a mere runaway drunk roused his quick temper.

"Sho' shows how the place is run!" he told himself. "Jacks is backed by somebody, or he never would dare it! A' right, Mister! Y' time's comin' an' don't y' never believe she ain't! An' it'll be Mr. Losson's Texas-raised boy that'll bring y' to the end o' y' rope."

The buckboard skidded around the corner of the last building of Cradock and lurched and jolted over the county-pike. Rannie yelled at the broncs, and the speed of their gallop increased. Out toward the Leaning D, fifteen miles away, the buckboard raced.

AFTER a couple of miles, Rannie pulled in the team and let them breathe for a moment. The rain was a steady drizzle, now, with massed nimbus clouds that promised a wet night. Donelson seemed to have slipped from unconsciousness into a drunken stupor. He snored raucously.

"Fine *tonto* y' turned out to be!" Rannie addressed the drunken rancher disgustedly. "Got a war on y' hands an' y' come in with a wad o' money in y' pocket that's ammunition for that war—all-same like .45 shells! An' what d' y' do? Why, y' head right into a saloon to throw it across the bar! An' let other folks do y' fightin' for y'! Blame y' rum-guzzlin' ol' hide!"

He looked toward the barely visible lights of Cradock. He rather wondered if Jacks would come after them. His foot struck something in the buckboard's bottom. A long .45-70 rifle and a box and a half of shells. He grinned dryly.

"Somebody'll ce'tainly git salivated, they try runnin' up on me," he grunted.

He heard hoofbeats on the road behind him. He scowled and stiffened a little in the seat, mechanically gathering up the lines. For there was more than one horse back there, pounding the trail out of Cradock.

He popped a line-end on the off-bronc's rump, and the buckboard lurched on through the drizzle, the team galloping heavily in the light mud.

Rannie drove with many looks over-shoulder. Of course, it might be Claire Donelson. She might have picked up some such escort as that cowboy of the Red Front stud-game, who had seemed to know so much about this layout. Perhaps Cephas Kinne—.

But Rannie shook his head at that speculation. Kinne would not be in shape to mount a horse after that beating; much less to ride as those horses were being ridden.

He yelled at the team, popping the line-end impartially on one rump and then the other. And from behind him came the fierce, triumphant-sounding yell of two or three men. He was sure that Jacks and a party were coming. It didn't seem to him that the marshal would make so much fuss about an arrest for drunkenness. This was something deadlier than arrest.

He reached down as the buckboard jumped and lurched. He put the lines between his knees and as he yelled again at the team, he got the Winchester up and worked the lever. It was loaded. He turned on the seat and fired in the general direction of the horsemen.

AND that shot brought certainty that these were killers behind him. For they replied with a furious blaze of shots. It was more noisy than dangerous. Not a bullet came near. They could no more see him, a hundred to a hundred and fifty yards away, than he could see them, in that darkness and drizzle of rain.

He cracked the line-end on the team again. But the horses behind were coming closer. The hoofbeats were louder. He took another shot, and this time somebody yelled. But the return-fire hit the buckboard. The thud of them in the wood seemed to rouse old Donelson. He made a vague, grumbling noise and shifted his position. Rannie yelled at him, shook him, but could not get him up. Another burst of shots, and one of the team dropped with an almost-human groan.

"An' that means fight—in anybody's country!" Rannie grunted.

He dropped out of the buckboard and

caught the old man by the shoulders. Somehow he heaved the limp figure up and staggered to the side of the road. He dropped him there, to be a little out of the line of fire. Then he ran back, to catch up the Winchester and the boxes of shells. He took the other side of the road, and now the dark mass of the riders was visible, a vague shape blacker than the darkness behind them.

"Now, this-here's what Paddy gi' the drum!" he said grimly, opening fire.

He scattered that single mass into what seemed a half-dozen spectral shadows. And lead fairly burned the air all around him. He fired until the long old rifle was empty, aiming at the flashes of their shots. Desperately, while they were holding in jumping horses and shooting at them, he reloaded the Winchester. . . .

Firing died. Somebody was yelling in a clear, authoritative voice. Certainly, not Jacks! Then Rannie recalled what that scowling cowboy had said, of seeing Lenoir in town; of observing Lenoir's catlike grin. Was this Lenoir and some of his Slash-L cowboy-gunfighters; come out to do the job that Jacks had bungled in town?

"Well, sir!" Rannie observed grimly, flattening himself cautiously in the little water-filled hollow that sheltered him somewhat. "Y' may be able, Mister Lenoir, to put up a li'l bitsy slab-board over me, when this is over. But y' goin' to know y' been in a fight. Y'll mebbe have one o' them course-dinners, but I'll be havin' a li'l snack!"

And when a dark shape showed, moving as to flank the buckboard, he whanged away at it and it disappeared.

The firing continued, after that, in spurts. Rannie shot at every movement he could see. And from several points the attackers fired at him. Muddy water; mud and bits of brush slammed against his face and body. But he was untouched.

It seemed to him that he had been lying in that hollow for hours, firing, reloading, firing, fired at. Then that same clear voice yelled again. A triumphant yell; from close at hand. There was cautious movement in the darkness ringing Rannie about. And he scowled bewilderedly. It sounded as if they were riding slowly away, not back toward town, but off across country. He lay motionless, listening. But the hoofbeats died away. They were really gone!

He got up stiffly and lurched toward the buckboard. And again he heard a horse, coming from the direction of Cradock.

HE slid behind the buckboard and waited. But this time there was no mistaking the sound. It was one horse, coming fast. And certainly it sounded like Chopo's hoofs.

He called to the girl. She answered shakily. Presently, she was reined in beside the buckboard.

"What— Who was it? I've heard the shooting for miles, it seems!"

"Unless 't was Lenoir, I do' 'no'," Rannie shrugged. "I fired a shot blind when I first heard 'em comin'. An' when they answered up I was shore o' one thing —they wasn't payin' a sociable call. They killed one hawse, an' that left nothin' to do but fight. So I reckon that's what y'd call it. I think they figgered it was too hard a job. So Lenoir—if 't was Lenoir—called 'em off."

"My father? Where is he?" she cried suddenly.

"I put him off to the side, where he wouldn't be hit," Rannie grinned. "He—well, he likely won't know tomorrow that there was a battle."

He went over to where he had left the old man. Apparently, Donelson had not moved during all the uproar of battle. Rannie shouldered the limp, heavy burden and came back to the buckboard. He put Donelson in the back. Nor was he particularly thoughtful to make the position comfortable. He was pretty well disgusted with the Leaning D's owner.

"Me an' that bronc are twins," he told Claire humorously. "I reckon we was both born to be hung. Not a scratch on either o' us. Now, I'm goin' to put Chopo in the dead hawse's place an' we'll move on to the ranch."

He dragged the unharnessed body to one side, with his saddle-rope, then unsaddled Chopo and put him in its place. The dun pranced nervously.

"Now, y' *'chito!*" he counseled the dun pony, "don't try nothin'. This is the first time Chopo ever pulled in harness," he told Claire. "He has packed Winchesters across the River, a couple times. An' once

he pulled a ol' Spanish gun a mile, to put it into a li'l' fight. But that was all on his back or at the end o' my rope.

"But he's a mighty wise li'l' ol' pony. Him an' me's seen lots together an' whatever we can't git out o' doin', why, *that's* the thing we love!"

They had eight miles to go, the girl said. She sat beside him. Twice, he heard her sigh. But whether from relief or from mere thought of what she had been through, he could not guess. But it was pleasant to be sitting there with her. He didn't need to see her. He was picturing her as he had seen her first, in town. He told her of the cowboy in the Red Front Saloon, and she made a scornful sound:

"Elvin Zink! Oh, he wishes us well. But that's his limit. He quit the day Tommy was killed by Jacks. He told Dad that he was not a fighting man, and Jacks' killing of Tommy showed that Lenoir had at last got control of the officers. And that meant a war to the finish. You see, Lenoir bought our mortgage from the bank and on the morning of the day Tommy was killed, Lenoir and Dad had a bitter argument. Lenoir told Dad he might as well sell—for five hundred dollars over the amount of the mortgage. Sixty-five hundred, for an outfit worth easily four times that much! And Dad—I don't know that he wouldn't have taken a thousand cash, to get out! But I happened to be in town and I found out what the discussion was. I walked in and set my foot down! And that afternoon Jacks found reason to kill Tommy, who never took a step backward from anyone."

SHE was silent for a while. Then she turned abruptly on the seat. He felt her turn and looked sidewise at her.

"Who are you? And why have you mixed into this?"

"First'n's easy to answer. Saddle-tramp, John Randolph Losson, mostly called Rannie, free, white an' twenty-three. As for the rest—nobody ever accused me o' havin' much judgment. But, shucks! Mebbe 't was not lackin' judgment, this time. Did y' ever—look in y' mirror?"

"Oh!" she said. Then, very coldly: "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ruin the effects of that, right now. You talked to Elvin Zink and Elvin, who had ideas, doubtless told you some of the lies which are so common around Cradock. It was partly because *his* expectations didn't materialize that Elvin was so ready to quit at the first sign of real trouble."

They turned in at an open gate in a wire-fence and for a mile drove silently. That carelessly-open gate was a sort of symbol to Rannie Losson, whose twenty-three years had been spent in rough places—in places where a man put his life on the muzzle of his six-shooter and juggled it precariously there and frequently saw it slip away. The gate was open because in this long scope of pasture there was nothing to get out.

"Y' been hubbin' hell, now ain't y'!" he said gravely. "Not much left on the place. . . . An' Lenoir holdin' ever' ace in the deck. . . . What d' y' aim to do, Claire? Y' paid over the money tonight an' that blocks legal licks at y' for how long?"

"A quarter. Just three months," she said drearily. "I—Oh, I don't know! Why talk about it! We can only drift along and hope. And I'm about done even hoping. Dad—Oh, he's simply not constituted to win a fight like this. Lenoir is! They've stolen us blind! His imported gunmen have terrorized the whole country. They have scared off puncher after puncher from the Leaning D and other small outfits."

Rannie identified a darker shadow as a motte of trees ahead. And Claire, speaking very briefly, said the house was at their end. The buckboard drew up before the door. A light showed inside instantly.

"OUR cook," Clair said. "He will help you carry Dad inside." She raised her voice: "Snowball! It's all right!"

A short, immensely wide negro, holding an oil lamp high above his gray head, stepped out of the door. He set the lamp on a shelf nailed to a veranda post.

"Sho' glad to see you, Miss Claire," he said solemnly. "Did—Did—Was ever'-thing all right?"

"Partly. Thanks to Mr. Losson, here. Will you help him carry Dad in, Snowball?"

"Shoo! I carry him by m'self, like always," said the cook, scornfully. "Do' need no he'p!"

Rannie swung down and would have

helped Claire out, but she jumped lightly to the ground and went into the house. So he moved around to the end of the buckboard. Snowball had shuffled to Donelson's shoulder and reached out to touch him.

"Agggggghh!" he groaned. "Cowboy! Boss done—done—"

He caught himself and looked toward the house. The whites of his eyes shone wildly.

"He—he—daid!" he gasped. "Cold!"

Rannie gaped, then leaned a little and put his hand on the old man's face. It was damp and to his hot hand felt clammily cold.

"Por amor de dios!" he whispered. "That first shootin' that hit the buckboard—that done it! He grunted—an' that was all! He was killed that second!"

He grunted fiercely to the old negro, and between them they lifted the heavy body from the vehicle. They stumbled into the house with it, and Claire appeared in the big room that was a sort of hall and sitting-room combined. She had a lamp in her hand.

"Put him in on his bed," she said.

Then something—either the dead man's face or the rolling eyes of the negro; for Rannie's muddy features could have showed nothing—told her. The lamp twitched in her hand. She bent far forward, staring, eyes wide, underlip caught in her teeth.

"Come on, y'!" Rannie snapped at Snowball.

And they went through a door into a bed room and laid the body of the Leaning D's owner gently on the bed. Claire came to the door as they straightened. The lamp was steady in her hand now. She put it down on a table and looked, not at her father, but at Rannie.

"When did it happen?"

He told her what he had told the cook, of bullets thudding into the buckboard and her father moving and groaning.

"Another debt!" she said evenly. "Something else we owe Lenoir! *I* owe Lenoir!" she corrected herself.

Rannie, frowning, was thinking of Lenoir's triumphant yell that had been signal for withdrawal of the killers.

"I bet y' he stumbled onto the ol' boy, a-lyin' the' under that bush. An' when he found he was dead, he figgered the job was done. I wasn't big enough to bother with."

Then another thought came. He looked at Claire, who was moving to the side of the bed.

"I reckon this is my fault," he said slowly. "If I had let Jacks take him to jail—No! *por dios!* Lenoir was out to down him. An' he owns Cradock jail. He would have shot him through the bars o' the cell, to take him out o' the way!"

"You're probably right," she nodded, without show of interest. "But it's no use talking, now. He—he's dead."

Rannie and the cook looked at each other and went out.

RANNIE waked with dawn. He rolled out of the blankets on the veranda where he had slept. He waked, as he always did, fully aware of everything that had happened to the moment when, having put away the buckboard and the team, he had taken the blankets the cook brought him and turned in.

"Hello!" a cowboy grinned, from the end of the veranda. "Job-huntin', or what?"

"What, I reckon," Rannie said slowly, studying the rather stupid, rather good-natured, face. Here was a follow-the-leader, he decided. "Jobs plentiful?"

"Goin' to be, I reckon, soon's we talk to the old' man this mawnin'," the cowboy grinned. "We're rollin' our beds. Dam' if we aim to git bushwhacked ever' time we cross the range, for thirty-five a month! Not when we can make forty without the bushwhackin', som'r's else!"

"Not fightin' men, huh?" Rannie nodded, looking the cowboy up and down curiously. "Where's the others?"

"Bunkhouse. Ol' man sleepin' it off?"

"Let's go take a look at 'em," said Rannie, getting up. He took the .45 which had lain under him and slid it into the holster on his thigh. The other Colt was still under his arm in the shoulder-holster. "Yes, sir! Le's go look 'em over. Y' just come up to see if the ol' man was ready to pay y' off? Then y' can just as well come on with me."

He hummed his favorite song absently, paying no attention to the curious side-glances with which the cowboy furtively honored him. The bunkhouse was a small,

square building, thirty yards from the back-door of the Leaning D house.

A tall, well-built man lounged in the doorway. He was evidently not in good humor. And his swollen eye and the reek of cheap whiskey about him gave Rannie the clue to his ill-temper. He lowered at Rannie, then looked at the cowboy:

"He up? Well, if he ain't, he dam' soon will be! I'm goin' to tell him an' git goin'. An'—"

"I reckon he ain't," the cowboy said apologetically. "I was goin' to see, but this feller says he wants to talk to us. So—"

"What're y' quittin' about?" Rannie inquired curiously. "This boy says it's because the Ol' Yaller is up in y' necks. Y' can't look a man in the eye, if he says Boo! at y' first. An' so y' goin' to roll y' beds an' go sheep-herdin'."

"Say!" the tall man yelled furiously, straightening. "You got plenty tongue! But you're goin' to have it knocked down yo' neck!"

"Ain't that what y' sent this kid around to tell the ol' man?" cried Rannie, looking tremendously surprised. "He told me that, a minute ago!"

"I never done it! I just said we wasn't goin' to git bushwhacked for thirty-five a month, when we could draw forty without the bushwhackin'. He's— Aw, hell!"

"What's the difference?" Rannie grinned. "Where's this other Timid Tommy? Trot him out! I want to see the whole collections, so's I can brag about it, in years to come. I want to be the champeen when it comes to spinnin' yarns about Yaller Streaks! Don't hold nothin' back on me!"

"SAY!" a high voice yapped from inside. "Who you think you're talkin' about?"

It was a man almost as tall as the one in the door, but immensely fat, with a babyish moon-face. Rannie stared, then sadly shook his head.

"No use! Y' can take him back. Nobody'd believe me if I told 'em. So y' want to git paid off, huh? When was payday? First or fifteenth—or what? Fifteenth. . . . A' right! Then y' each got five-eighty-five comin' up to last night."

He drew out a dirty roll of bills and a little silver. Solemnly, he began to count it. He nodded, looked up at the silent, gaping trio, and lifted a finger to wiggle it.

"Li'l Yaller Streak first. Come git it!"

He put the money in the young cowboy's hand and again beckoned with his finger.

"Now, the Middle-Sized Sheep Herder!

He looked the tall, dark man in the eyes at just the proper moment and lifted his brows inquiringly. The man came sulkily three steps to take his money. Rannie watched him narrowly, but the man, after a couple of sulky, darting glances, went back inside the bunkhouse. Rannie followed and put into the fat man's hand his pay.

"Better be shore that's loaded," he drawled and the dark man, fishing in his warbag, jumped as if shot, with a pistol in his hand. He glared at Rannie who stood just within the door, his back to the wall, grinning.

"All o' y' git y' stuff together!" said Rannie, ignoring glare and pistol. "An' —*git!*"

"We'll be gittin' soon's we git breakfast!" the dark man snarled, buckling on a shell-belt.

"Y'll be gittin' a dam' sight quicker'n that! For y' don't *git* breakfast on the Leanin' D," Rannie grinned. "An' if the whole bunch o' y'd like to argue about it, with me."

Invitingly, he looked at them in turn, with thumb hooked in shell-belt just over the butt of his pistol.

"Lousy outfit, anyhow!" the dark man growled. "Ol' drunk for a boss! An' a girl that—"

He stiffened beside his bunk. Rannie had crossed the space between them like a racing snake and his face was within three inches of the other's.

"Y' hear somethin' like a low whistlin'?" Rannie asked anxiously. "Funny! That was ol' St. Pete. He was whistlin' for ever'body that aims to come in the Gate this trip, to come runnin'! Y' can't make up what passes for y' mind? *I* can make it up, for y' . . ."

But the cowboy could not face the glare in Rannie's eyes. He licked dry lips and

moved his shoulders uncomfortably. Rannie looked at him, let go his pistol-butt and hit him twice—a savage left to the stomach that doubled him, gasping; a terrific right to the chin that dropped him across the bunk, motionless. He whirled on the others:

"I hate to hear a louse say lousy," he meditated. "Well? What y' waitin' for? A special invitation? Git y' stuff an' git out o' this!"

HE watched them go, not many minutes later, on horses which the grinning Snowball assured him were their personal property. The tall man whom he had hit reeled in the saddle, holding onto the horn.

"'At sho' purty when you hit 'at Blackie!" Snowball grinned. "He was all time talk 'bout how bad he was. Shoo! Fo'-bell false alarm!"

Claire came in to the table as Rannie stepped through the kitchen door. He was scrubbed clean now. She looked at him. Her face was thinner, he thought, than it had been the night before. But she was very calm.

"We'll have the funeral today. I'll ride in and make the arrangements. I suppose that the precious crew in the bunkhouse will leave as Elvin Zinc did."

"They have left," Rannie drawled solemnly. "They ask' to be paid off, so I give 'em five days apiece an' they're gone. One thing—no matter who we hire in their place, it's bound to be all for the better!"

"We?" she said coldly, staring at him. "We?"

"Well—us," Rannie shrugged. "Does y' foreman eat on the back steps, with his tin plate on his knee?"

"I didn't know that we had a foreman," she said with chin up. Twin spots of color had come into her pale cheeks.

"Yeh. Y' have got a foreman. Y' know—" he sat down at the table and leaned his elbows on it, to regard her gravely "—y' said somethin' last night about takin' me for a gunfighter. An' about Lenoir importin' 'em. A' right! Now, y' figger out what y're buckin'. How're y' goin' to run this outfit, without somebody that knows a cow from a critter to help y'? I did hear in town that Cephas Kinne has been y' mainstay. Well, from what I could see o' him, in the Red Front, he wasn't so much to start with—an' right now he's likely in Cradock jail, nursin' a mighty headache. Don't be silly! Take it like y'd needed a tough *hombre,* an' y' put in y' order, an' I was unpacked out o' the box!"

"I'll talk to you later, after the funeral," she said unwillingly. And it was her eyes, not Rannie's, that dropped.

"I WONDER," Rannie said to himself, scowlingly, "if that homely buzzard, Doc Meadows, has showed up in town. If he has, he *sabes* plenty where I'm at an' about ever'thing that's happened. Anyhow, he ought to!"

He was saddling Chopo. It was the morning after the funeral—which had been quiet, but attended by more than Rannie had expected; some townsfolk; the nearer ranchers of the small outfits, who were naturally, if not too openly, anti-Lenoir. Now only a raw gash in the earth of a little enclosed space, on a hill sheltered by tall cottonwoods, remained to tell of Jim Donelson, who had not been strong enough to buck Lenoir, and who had taken to the bottle to drown that fact.

Rannie swung up and spoke with mechanical sharpness to the dun pony. With Doc' Meadows on the side of the Leaning D, on his side, he was not worried about what the Lenoir men could do to him.

"Ol' Doc's a salty gunfighter," he grinned reminiscently, as he rode out to look at the Leaning D range and the cattle left on it. "If the's a soft spot in him, I never found it. Buckin' the likes o' this snake Lenoir'll be pie for him. An' whatever li'l' business he had on, an' wanted me to help him with, if I know the ol' boy, he'll forgit it an' side in with me on this proposition."

Rannie's mind roamed back.

He had fought with Doc Meadows two years before, in something like this same sort of war. And they had run guns across the Rio Grande together, cheerfully risking their necks a dozen times a day.

He rode steadily, all day, establishing in his mind the limits and the lay of the Leaning D. He checked the cattle he saw and when he rolled in his blanket that

night, on the far northeast corner of the ranch, he lay for a long time with the red end of his cigaret dimming and brightening as he smoked and stared up at the starless sky.

"Not near so many cattle as she said," he muttered to himself. "Not half so many, an' that was little enough! I would say that Lenoir has been takin' bites out o' the Leanin' D. Either ol' Jim Donelson didn't know about it, or mebbe he knowed an' never wanted to tell her. A man that was willin' to take Lenoir's offer an' run, might not have had the nerve to tell that girl the truth all 'round."

He was up before day. He started back to the house by a roundabout course that would bring him through the Leaning D northeast pasture, the only one he had not yet seen. And here, where there should have been at least two hundred head of cows, by Claire's figures, he found only scattered animals, an occasional cow and calf.

He rode scowlingly. What the outfit needed was hands. And where to get them? He thought that he could do with four, if those four were of a fighting kind. And so he rode up to the crest of a ridge and at sight of the half-dozen men coming, pulled in Chopo short to stare. His hand slid down to the smooth brown stock of the carbine under his leg.

THEY saw him as soon as he was skylined on that ridge. They yelled and charged forward. Rannie looked askingly about him. There was a bunch of boulders. He could make a stand. But eventually they would get him. It seemed better to trust to Chopo's heels, as he had done several times in his hectic past. Then he saw that the bunch had pulled in. Only two men came forward. They were waving at him. He leaned a little forward, to stare narrowly.

"Well! I be damned!" he muttered. "If it ain't Doc! I would know that long-coupled, loop-laigged jigger's picture a mile away, if 't was tore in two!"

So he grinned and crooked a leg around the saddlehorn and made a cigaret. He watched Doc's long, familiar figure on the dapple-gray. Wildfire, coming uphill. Doc was sour-faced as usual, Rannie observed affectionately.

"Well, y're a fine one!" he yelled, when Doc was breasting the slope with the tall, brown-faced, well-dressed man a little behind him. "Scare a fella out o' ten years' growth! It ain't polite, these days, to run up on a man on the Leanin' D range!"

"Yuh're a fine one, yo'self!" Doc Meadows snarled. "Didn't I tell yuh to come to Cradock an' lay low an' wait till I showed up? An' what the hell did yuh do? I'll tell yuh: Yuh played the dam' burro about a petticoat, same's always! I swear, Rannie, I do 'no' if yuh was dropped on yo' haid, one time, when yuh was right little, or if yuh read that dam' novel-book too many times! Yuh got yo'self into a peck o' misery an' jist happened I come along in time to yank yuh out!"

"Same ol' calamity-howlin' son of a dog, now ain't y'? If ever anything was fixed up perfect an' handed to y', y'd hand it back because it was too perfect! I swear—"

"S'pose we cut out the monkey-business!" suggested the man beside Doc. His round, bright, hard brown eyes shuttled from Doc to Rannie and back to Doc. "Get down to brass tacks with this man an'—"

"I'll handle this business, Lenoir!" Doc said grimly. "Keep out o' this. Yuh mebbe know a hell of a lot about a hell of a lot o' things. But a wise man knows the's some things he don't *sabe*. This boy is one o' the things *you* don't!"

"Lenoir!" Rannie said softly, looking at the Slash L owner. "Lenoir . . . Well! If this ain't a pleasure! To think o' runnin' into y' like this. Never would've expected it. Why, I bet y', y're the illegitimate that was shootin' at me the otheh night, an' killed Jim Donelson."

Doc Meadows, almost at Rannie's stirrup, leaned sidewise with snaky swiftness. One long, powerful arm encircled Rannie, half-lifting him from the saddle-seat. The steely hand of the other arm closed on Rannie's gun-wrist, holding the .45 in the holster. Rannie wrestled furiously with Doc.

"Le' me go!" he panted snarlingly. "Dam' y' soul, Doc! Le' me kill that son of a dog! I'll likely never git another look at his *face!* Le' me go!"

"Yuh dam' petticoat-chasin', smoke-swallowin' li'l idjut!" Doc said dispassionately. "If yuh don't cause me more grief! What yuh thing yuh're in Cradock about, anyhow? We come to Cradock on Lenoir's pay-roll! An' a fine tangle yuh made out o' the business! Sidin' in with that drunk fool, Donelson! All because that gal o' his, that the whole country knows is Kinne's, goggles her eyes at yuh! Fightin' yo' own side! Wasn't for me—"

"It's y' own self is the dam' fool!" Rannie snarled. "Thinkin' I'd go on the pay-roll o' the likes o' *that!* A sneakin', bushwhackin'—"

"THAT'S enough!" Lenoir snapped, with brown face turning red and mouth compressed. He breathed noisily through his nose, and more than ever his opaque eyes looked like brown marbles. "Just plenty! Hard words don't often mean a thing to me! I can take 'em when it's convenient, for as long's it's convenient. But I'm done with him, Doc! You vouched for him. I took your word for it. But from now on—"

"Yuh go on down the hill, Lenny!" Doc drawled. "Rannie is seventeen kinds o' dam' fool. But for the work we got ahead o' us, they don't come no better. I never told yuh the half o' what I know about him. Right now, he's peevish because yuh powdered him some. Yuh go on downhill an' we'll come in a few minutes."

Lenoir shrugged wide shoulders and turned his horse. Rannie, sitting quiet in the saddle now, watched him rejoin the others; saw the small, but tremendously expressive hand and shoulder-jerk he gave when one of his men down there moved to him.

"Now, Rannie," Doc said quietly enough, letting go of him, "we'll augur this business out. I've knowed Lenny Lenoir a long time. Him an' me was 'most as close as yuh an' me been, ten years back. But Lenny's got a haid on him. He aims to die rich, an' die rich he will!"

"Well—well-fixed, anyhow," Rannie grinned, cryptically. "I ain't denyin' y' that much, because he's said to be well-fixed right now."

"He aims to be one o' them cattle-kings y' hear-tell about," Doc grunted, but now he was watching Rannie narrowly, those oddly mixed eyes of his a shade narrower. "An' the's some one-cow outfits in this country that's due to git stepped on if they don't come to time. Specially one that's stubborner'n all the others. The's goin' to be some powder burned, an' that's where me an' yuh fit in."

"Uh-uh!" Rannie said flatly. "Now I don't give a damn what he aims to do or be. Me' an' y', Doc, we have done some fightin'. But we have fought on the side that had the right on it. An' I don't believe for a minute that y'd be ridin' with Lenoir today, if y' knowed all the ins an' outs o' this!"

"Rannie! The's just one in an' one out, in a range-war, far's we give a whoop: An' that's who's got the long pocketbook! When we mixed into the war between Minto Prout's 202 an' Vaughan Quirk's Bar-V-Bar, I made the dicker, same's always, for the both o' us. Well, I went to Prout. He wouldn't meet the price. Quirk done it an' we fought for him an' we licked Minto Prout. He should've seen my price."

"Y' mean y'd have had us fightin' for that louse that murdered his own brother an' his brother's wife?" Rannie cried, incredulously. "Doc—"

Then he stopped. He stared at Doc Meadows' harsh-lined, deep-furrowed brown face. And it was like having a curtain drawn back. A hundred things, small and large, that he had noticed, but on which he had put a humorous or affectionate interpretation, came back to him.

Hard—rock-hard—he had always called Doc Meadows. But he had not really believed it until now. He had thought that a mere pose, like his own ferocious talk at times. Now he saw that he had fooled himself. Doc Meadows was just as hard, just as bloody-handed, as he had claimed to be.

"Go on down to Lenoir, Doc," he said shakily. "I—I am done talkin'."

"What d' yuh mean?" Doc scowled. "Yuh goin' to quit this foolishness an' come on with me, like always? Lenoir is too foxy to bother about yo' callin' him names. An' he owns this country,

except for that Yoakum Ward that we're goin' to wipe out lock, stock an' bar'l. Yuh downed three o' Lenoir's salty boys the other night. But more's where they come from. If he'd met me first, an' found out who yuh was, he wouldn't have swore out the warrants."

"Oh, he swore out warrants, huh?"

"Yeh, o' course! That give him the law at his back when he come a-smokin' out the young Smart Aleck that was buttin' into Cradock affairs. But now, o' course, he'll squash 'em. Lenny'll listen to me."

"Yeh?" Rannie drawled. If his face were blank, inwardly he was seething. "Yeh? Listen to y', will he? A' right, Doc! Go back down to him an' have him listen to this:

"I'm not sidin' with any such low-down passel o' murderers as his. Not any! An' if he comes at me with warrants, y' tell him he better ram 'em down the muzzle of his gun. That's the only way he'll serve 'em! An' he better look hawk-eyed from now on. For I'm goin' to down him first chance I git! An' that goes for all that rides with him!"

"Yuh mean that?" Doc said slowly, staring hard. "A' right, Rannie. Yuh're a dam' fool. No gunman's got a right to be picky. Except, mebbe, to pick the winnin' side. So I'll say 'so long' to yuh. For the next time we meet—"

RANNIE watched him only for a split-second. Then he backed Chopo behind the boulder nearest him. But he made no stop there. He backed him down the slope until the ridge hid him from the Lenoir men. Then he whirled the dun pony, and they went like a scared jack-rabbit down the stony ridge, to jump into an arroyo, scramble out on the far side and go racing across the broken ground.

He thought that he had an advantage over the others. They would try chasing him, no doubt of that! But he knew the range pretty well, from yesterday's riding over it. And it was good cover.

He got to the house without once seeing them, though at the first he heard them a time or two, trying to cut his trail. He came fast toward the corral. And a rifle whanged from inside a house-window. The slug whined by him. He pulled up, there on the open flat, glaring at the house. A hand came out of the window. It made an unmistakable gesture—the old pushing sign none could misunderstand. Claire Donelson was behind that rifle. And Claire was telling him to go away. He could not understand it.

"*Por Dios,* I'm a-goin' to find out!"

But at the first step Chopo took, the rifle whanged! The slug kicked up dust and Chopo shook his head. The next shot came so close to the dun pony's wise head that Rannie pulled him in. He was not afraid that Claire, whatever crazy notion was in her head, would shoot him. But she might kill Chopo, intentionally or by accident.

"Hey, Cowboy!" Snowball's voice was bellowing from the kitchen-door. "You go on 'way! Else Missy kill 'at pony! *She* find out all about you in town, today! You go on! An' you stay gone!"

"Well!" said Rannie. "This is what y'd call a mess o' fish, Chopo! If she was in town, today, an' she run across any o' Doc Meadows' tracks—well, she'd have the notion that Doc had: I come in as a Lenoir killer. An' by mistake I got tangled up on her side. An' with Doc explainin' to Lenoir I would be straightened out an' join the Slash L."

He saw no sense in trying to persuade her otherwise. As a matter of fact he saw little sense staying on the Leaning D, right now. The county officers would naturally come out with a shooting posse of Lenoir men and try serving those warrants. And there was nothing to do on the place.

"Yoakum Ward," he said suddenly, between his teeth. "They aim to wipe him out because he'll fight. Y' know, Chopo, I would not be a bit surprised if Yoakum Ward was the fella we're lookin' for!"

But he had no idea of the direction of Ward's place. And he didn't want to ask the cook. For there was no use publishing the news. And he had to get out of sight. Lenoir might decide to have a look at the house. He turned the pony and rode on a line that paralleled the house-wall, heading for the road.

WHEN he came to it, he looked thoughtfully in the direction of town. But Lenoir's crowd was entrenched there,

and he was known there to too many. He turned the other way and rode at a foxtrot on the side of the road where Chopo's hoofprints would hardly show. He had made several miles when he saw a bunch of cattle being worked by several men, off to the side of the road.

He rode over to them and stopped his horse in the dust of the moving cattle. There were three or four men moving about. One rode up to Rannie. He was a youngster of around Rannie's age, but already a hard-looking six-footer. And he looked sharply at Rannie with a good-humored mouth drawn into a tight line.

"Howdy!" he said. "Lookin' for somebody?"

"Boss, I reckon," Rannie nodded. For he had seen the 9-Bar-9 brand on the cattle. "Yoakum Ward?"

"An' what might you want with Yoakum Ward?"

"I'll tell him."

"No. Tell me!"

And from under the flap of his batwing chaps came the big youngster's hand, with a pistol in it. He trained it upon Rannie's mid-section. Rannie kept his hands motionless on the horn of his saddle. He looked at the pistol-muzzle, then lifted his head a trifle and yawned widely.

"Tell *me!*" the cowboy said grimly. "I'm the fo'man."

"What's trouble?" a very bull's bellow demanded. And out of the drag of the forming herd came a short, grizzled man, on a chunky *bayo coyote* horse. He was fat looking, and the skin was peeling on his fire-red face. Except for a certain alertness of the clear, small blue eyes, he showed no emotion at sight of the foreman covering a stranger.

"MR. WARD?" Rannie inquired. "I come to work for y'."

"Don't need nobody," Ward said calmly.

"Y' need me! What with Lenoir importin' gunfighters the likes o' Doc Meadows an' Rannie Losson, y' goin' to have y' hands full."

"Yeh? What's you call yo'self?"

"Rannie Losson. Original from Texas. Lately from anywhere the winds blow to."

"Rannie Losson. Ward scowled. "You mean the's two Rannie Lossons? You say Lenoir imported—"

"Yeh. He imported me. Only I never knowed it. Y' see—"

Ward and his foreman stared while he told them as much as they needed to know of the row in town, and of Claire's driving him from the Leaning D. They studied him closely; shrewdly. They looked furtively at each other, then back to Rannie, He finished and reached for Durham and papers.

"An' so, I can either hightail out o' the country, or I can help that girl out by linin' up on y' side."

"She's Kinne's!" the foreman shrugged. "Nobody has ever managed to take her away from him. What she sees in him is beyond all this country. But he's the white-haired boy."

"I swear I 'most believe you," Ward meditated aloud. "It's so queer a tale that I'm 'most ready to believe you because o' that. An' while I aim to put up a battle that'll make Custer's Last Stand look like a ladies' aid hair-pullin', I could use a good gun-fighter right handy. Put up that hog-leg, Gabe. Let's think this over."

The foreman reholstered his Colt. He looked steadily at Rannie, then grinned:

"No 'most believin' about it, Yoakum," he said abruptly. "I believe him. Doc Meadows was raised back o' Honey Grove in Fannin County. So was I! An' he's the cold-bloodedest killer ever I hear tell about. Any man that'd run with him would be as bad as him, or fooled. An' I don't believe Losson's o' the Meadows' stripe."

"A' right! You're hired!" Ward nodded. "I reckon you have seen some trouble through the smoke. But I'm bettin' that what you'll see here'll put the cap-sheaf onto any you ever run into. Lenoir'll hit us a lick, an' if we hit back, he'll swear out warrants. An' if we don't stand an' git killed peaceable, we'll be bustin' the law! We—"

"Comp'ny!" Gable grunted. "Reckon this could be the li'l' posse yuh talked to, Losson?"

Rannie watched the rolling dust-cloud on the road. In the torrid sunlight he caught the flash of spots on the leather band of Doc Meadows' floppy hat. He nodded.

"Is!" he said curtly. "My advice is not to let 'em come up on us."

Gabe yelled and the cowboys—three of

them—left the cattle. The whole party put the hooks to their horses and raced off. Gabe forged up alongside of Rannie.

"Headin' for the 'Dobe Walls a mile away," he yelled. "Make a stand-off, there."

THE walls were the remnant of an ancient ranch house and outbuildings. The 9-Bar-9 men made it a hundred yards ahead of the yelling, shooting bunch of Lenoir's. They ran in behind the breast-high walls and dropped off of their horses. Rannie jerked his Winchester out of the scabbard and jumped back to get a shot.

He aimed at Lenoir's black horse, but missed, as Lenoir whirled the black around and with a jerk of his hand sent his party into a scattered skirmish-line.

He lined his sights on the nearest man. But from all the party behind the walls now came a burst of fire. When the man at whom Rannie had aimed came limply out of the saddle, to be dragged by the foot for twenty yards, there was no way of telling who had killed him.

The Lenoir side dismounted in an arroyo's shelter and began working toward the walls with occasional halts to fire. They took over in greasewood and mesquite and Spanish dagger. They shot accurately, too. The 'dobe of the walls was chipped and knocked into the faces of the 9-Bar-9 men.

"Lenoir's high tailin'," Gabe called to Rannie and Yoakum Ward. "I have got a notion he's goin' for more warriors!"

"Yeh, likely," Rannie yelled, for he saw how the men outside were working to envelope the ruins. "This gang's goin' to bottle us up an' hold us till he comes back."

He moved across to a corner where a cowboy was firing furiously at the greasewood bush that sheltered a man, fifty yards away. He watched the cowboy for a minute, then touched him on the shoulder.

"Le' me see if I have better luck!"

He waited, statue-still, eyes narrowed, until there was the barest, vaguest motion behind that bush as the attacker moved for a better sight. Then up jumped the carbine—and with its flat, vicious report a man sprang up as if stung, from behind the greasewood. He dropped instantly, but not before he had another bullet in him. The cowboy gaped at Rannie. Slowly, he shook his head.

"Fella!" he drawled earnestly. "I do' no' whereabouts yuh come from, but that's Bill-Show shootin'! Howdy!"

There was only one Lenoir man now left to cover the rear of the ruins. Rannie and the cowboy sent lead searching through the low brush until the Lenoir man there gave it up and began to worm his way backward. He was unfortunate enough to cross a tiny open space which Rannie—outside now—could see. He crashed over on his side and lay still. He had two bullets in him, but he would get well, Rannie decided, when he came up to him. A hole in his shoulder and a broken thigh-bone would not necessarily be fatal.

"Well!" he said with grim humor, looking up at Rannie. "I reckon we all make mistakes, an' some make bigger'n others. Me an' Lenoir shore made two. I thought this was goin' to be a soft five-dollar-a-day job. Lenoir says the 9-Bar-9 wouldn't fight! Six o' us, he says, ought to settle their hash. Then he skipped to bring more, just in case."

Rannie nodded, looking across the greasewood flat and indulged in some mental arithmetic. Six, less the first man hit before they had taken to the brush; less the one he had killed; less this fellow. Three left, to the 9-Bar-9's six. But one of those three was Doc Meadows.

He got up, taking the wounded man's Winchester and pistol, and ran back to the ruins.

"Open up on 'em like hell!" he panted, to Gabe and Yoakum Ward. "I'm goin' to try a stunt."

HE swung up on Chopo and rode out from the ruined house. He swung the dun pony and, almost flat over the saddle-horn, came swinging around in a circle, heading for that arroyo in which the Lenoir faction had left their horses.

He got half-way before he was noticed, for the 9-Bar-9 men were blazing away furiously, and the three in the greasewood were making reply as fiercely.

But he had still a hundred yards to go when a man yelled to Doc Meadows, then came to a knee and fired three shots at Rannie.

Rannie went down over the side of Chopo, Indian-fashion. He grunted to the pony and they went as if running a quarter-

race. Fifty yards and nobody else had fired. Then, behind a bush, he saw Doc Meadows' gangling figure, on a knee, his carbine coming up. And Doc Meadows was as good a rifle-shot as Rannie Losson —which was plenty good enough to drop a running horse.

There was a ragged-edged gash ahead. Chopo would have gone around this steep-sided little arroyo. But Rannie jerked his head about and the dun pony gathered himself like a cat on the brink of it, then with sobbing grunt, hurled himself onto it. He stumbled on the rocky bottom; he fell to his knees and rolled on his side before Rannie could jerk his feet from the stirrups. He pinned his rider's leg under him.

There was a sharp rock under Rannie's thigh. With the pony's eight hundred pounds pressing the leg against the rock, the pain was agonizing. But more than his own hurt, Rannie thought of Chopo. It seemed impossible that the pony had landed in that nest of rocks without breaking a leg. He pushed on the saddle-horn. Chopo lifted his head and Rannie, shoving on the horn, dragged his leg out. And Chopo scrambled to his feet.

Rannie stared incredulously. But there seemed no broken bones about him. He took a step and another step. Blood was darkening the dun hide of his forelegs where rocks had gashed him. But he was able to walk.

Rannie heard running footsteps above him. Then there came a burst of firing from the ruins and the footsteps stopped. Another Lenoir man had been downed. That left two.

Rannie got to his feet somehow. The leg which had been under Chopo was almost paralyzed. He supported himself with the carbine and hobbled to the pony. Somehow, he got into the saddle and Chopo went stiffly forward. For fifty yards he went at a walk, until Rannie, face white and mouth compressed with the pain of his bruised leg, dared turn the pony toward the lower, less steep, wall.

Chopo went up with a grunt. Rannie spurred him, looking over his shoulder. Somebody in the greasewood was firing at him. The lead sang by viciously. Rannie ducked and this time spurred Chopo in earnest. And the game little dun surged forward, broke into a lope, then straightened out into a fast gallop. Down into the arroyo where the Lenoir men's horses were, he went sliding.

SIX horses were there, including Wildfire. Chopo whimnied at his old trail-mate. Rannie felt a queer jerk in his throat, with sight of the dapple-gray, and thought of what he stood for. Then he shook his head grimly:

"No use botherin' about that! I rode with a Doc Meadows I never saw. Not really."

He went swiftly to the horses. They were standing with reins dropped. He knotted each pair of reins on the saddle-horn. Then, with a wild yell, he sent them forward. He chased them up the arroyo, drove them out of it and across the flat. He had them in a gallop that continued after he had pulled Chopo in and sat watching them run.

He turned back, to make the ruins by a roundabout course, out of rifle-shot of the remaining pair of Lenoir men. He grinned a little, entirely without humor. The first skirmish with Doc Meadows was to him. Gabe Annear remarked as much, when they jogged away from the unhorsed pair and headed for the 9-Bar-9 house.

"Yeh. . . . But!" Rannie nodded grimly. "That'll make Doc all the more anxious to swing my topknot on his headstall. I know that hairpin from the back. Y' fight him, y' got to kill him to stop him. I have seen him git up off a floor, all cut an' shot to pieces, looked like, an' kill two men, then he ridin' inside a mouth."

THEY had ten miles to ride. They came to the house in mid-afternoon, and as they rode up to the corrals behind the long, low, log-and-stone building, four men came from the opposite direction.

"Well!" Gabe Annear muttered. "What ever got that crowd together, I do'no' . . . Tom Neely, o' the TN," he explained briefly to Rannie, "he usually wouldn't be found at a funeral with Lawton Stone o' the Spear-L, though he don't mind Urch Veale, so much. Veale runs the Deuce o' Hearts. But Stone an' Veale git along. I don't *sabe* it!"

The cowboys unsaddled. Rannie, watching the four men ride up while he pulled the saddle from Chopo and looked at the

pony's scarred, blood-streaked legs, found three middle-aged and one in the late twenties. All were very solemn.

"Well!" Yoakum Ward grinned, not troubling to conceal the same wonderment that Gabe Annear had voiced. "How-come? You-all figger out mebbe I was right, six months ago, when I told you we had to hang together or starve as Lenoir let us?"

"Just that!" one nodded. "We're in a split stick, an' Lenoir owns the prod. We got word he has been sendin' for tough gun-fighters. If he gits a bunch o' gladiators in an' gits the jump on us, we're licked! If he wipes out one outfit, that makes the rest that much weaker. We come to talk over things, Yoakum, an' kind o' lay some plans."

Rannie watched them get down and go toward the house with Ward. He cleaned the pony's legs and doused them with liniment, then dodged back from the cutting hoofs. Gabe leaned on the corral bars and watched absently.

"Gabe!" Yoakum Ward called from the back-door. "You an' Rannie come on in!"

They went into an untidy long room that ran across the front of the house and out to where the five men sat on the veranda.

"The trouble is," said Ward, "in figgerin' what to do. Rannie, I reckon you have seen a lot o' fightin', for all you're younger'n anybody here. What d' you allow?"

Rannie looked from face to face. Ward introduced him to Tom Neely, long-bodied, long-faced, a bitter-mouthed man near fifty; to Urch Veale, wizened, hawk-nosed, beady-eyed; to Lawton Stone, youngest of the ranchers, a round-faced, good-humored seeming man; and to young Neely, who was very much like his father.

They watched him curiously. Evidently, he thought, Ward had told his story.

"I reckon y' all know I haven't got a bit o' business in this country," he said thoughtfully. "Nothin' to hold me except I have kind o' got my feelin's hurt by Jacks, the marshal, an' by Lenoir. An' I kind o' feel responsible for Donelson gittin' killed. Feel like I owe his girl somethin' in the way o' help. With y' all, it's different: Y' got to fight or h'ist y' tails. Now—y' all really want to go the whole hog? It's goin' to be that—down to the last bristle!"

"LIKE yuh said," Lawton Stone drawled, "it ain't a question o' what we want. It's what we got to do! I reckon we're all set to fight, an' we can round up about twenty or twenty-one guns, countin' ourselves in. If we let ever'thing else go to hell an' put in our time at fightin' instead o' workin'. But what to do? That's the question! We had a couple Rangers in for a while, but there was too much politics to let 'em do anything much. They stopped some o' the stealin', long's they was here.

"Here's what y' got to do! Forgit politics an' law! Start right in an' smash Lenoir an' let the law end wait till that's done! He's goin' to swear out warrants, same's he done for me about downin' his men the other night on the road. But y' can't pay attention to that or he'll lick y' outside the courtroom an' he'll lick y' inside! Y' got to bust this country wide open an' figger to sweep up the pieces later on. Now! Y' want to hit him a lick?"

They nodded uncertainly, looking one at the other.

"A' right! Le's go comb his range for four-five hundred head o' Leanin' D stock! It's shore been rustled. An' Lenoir shore rustled it. Le's go take it back—not specially to help the Leanin' D—but to hit Lenoir a lick, an' to show that honest cowmen around here are stickin' together!"

"He'll have it hid!" Tom Neely objected snarlingly. "An' we'd be roamin' wild over his range, targets for ever' bushwackin' son of a dog on his payroll. *No bueno!*"

"We wouldn't be roamin'," Rannie grinned. "We'd be goin' plumb cat-eyed. An' I reckon we could find out where his holdin' ground is."

"Perhaps—" it was a soft Spanish voice, coming from the door of the house at their backs "—I can help the *señores*. As you know, *señor*—" the slender, darkly-handsome young Mexican bowed a little toward Yoakum Ward "—I was once a *vaquero* on the Slash-L. I could not endure to steal as Lenoir steals. But before I left, I learned many things. And one of them is the place where he would have stolen cattle. I will be honored to show you."

Rannie looking from the *vaquero* at the others, caught a small frown creasing Gabe Annear's brows. Gabe looked at Rannie and leaned a little toward him.

"Well, *mebbe* that's why Pasco quit Lenoir."

THEY gabbled among themselves for minutes, while Rannie and Gabe Annear and Yoakum Ward sat silent. The argument boiled down until it was raging between Tow Neely and Lawton Stone. Then Ward sat up with a jerk that thudded the front legs of his chair upon the porch.

"It's got to be the majority, I reckon! Now, how many o' you-all want to hit Lenoir like Rannie says?"

"I will!" Lawton Stone grunted. "Urch?"

"Yeh . . . reckon," Urch Veale nodded. "Tom, you might's well come on. Nobody's goin' to believe you're skeered o' gittin' shot at. An' any way you look at it, it's doin' somethin' an' that's twice what we ever done before."

Neely scowled, but nodded his head. Ward looked around at the grim faces.

"Now! I'm goin' to s'gest somethin' else. . . . We got to have a ring-leader. My vote's for this boy. He's been in range-wars before. Him an' Doc' Meadows that's fightin' with Lenoir, now, they was in on the Bar-V-Bar's battlin' with the 202. An' they win that war. He knows more'n we do."

Again the argument raged between Neely and Stone. And once more Urch Veale pulled Tom Neely his way. Rannie nodded and turned to Pasco the *vaquero*.

"Pasco," he said in fluent Border Spanish, "we are going to ride with you to this place where may be the Leaning D's cattle. We go—" he looked at the others and lapsed into English: "How quick can y' all git y' men?"

"Sudden!" Tom Neely grunted. The others nodded.

"Tomorrow!" said Rannie, to Pasco.

They got up and went to their horses. Rannie and Gabe grinned at each other, watching them ride in three different directions.

"I go now, *señores,*" Pasco said from behind them, "to get my fine *palomino* horse. He is in the Hill Pasture. I will be here with daylight, again. And then—*adiós*. Lenoir!"

They watched him swing up on his black. They lifted negligent hands in answer to the arm jerk with which he bade them goodbye as he raced away. Rannie hunkered, favoring his stiff leg.

"Y' don't think he quit the Slash-L for just the reason he says, huh?" Rannie grinned.

"He'd maverick his brother's calf, give him the chance!" growled Gabe.

"But how," Rannie said softly, "would he go about collectin' that *palomino* o' his, an' ridin' to the Slash-L an' back?"

"He couldn't! Not an' be back by sun up!" Gabe scowled. "Yuh think he aims to sell us out?"

Rannie nodded, staring blankly straight ahead.

"Town's close enough to make in that time," he said vaguely. "Anybody there would do for messenger to Lenoir on the ranch?"

"Plenty! Yuh ought to know it by now!"

"Then we got a li'l ride ahead o' us," Rannie grinned.

Out of the *remuda* in the corral, Gabe picked Rannie a thirteen-hand white horse, a half-Arab gelding. For himself he chose a long-legged bay. Ward listened scowlingly to Rannie's theory about Pasco, then shrugged.

"Better take plenty ca'tridges, boys," was his advice. "You never know what you'll run into at Cradock, these days—an' specially these nights—but it won't be nothin' that ca'tridges won't help!"

THEY rode fast across the 9-Bar-9 range, then pulled the staples from the Leaning D fence, went over it and rode hell-for-leather through darkness. It was near ten when they pulled in on the very edge of the county-seat and tied the horses behind an old 'dobe house.

"I know the Mex' that lives here. He's a good man," Gabe grunted. "He'll feed us, first, an' my belly's cleavin' to my backbone. An' then he'll do some scoutin' for us!"

They knocked at the back door of the house, and it was opened by a powerfully-built Mexican of middle age and quiet, intelligent brown face. He grinned at sight

of Gabe and let them in. They sat with him in one of the dirt-floored rooms of his house, while his wife and daughters brought food.

"Pasco is no good," said Juan Ramos, when they had talked a while. "I think that the *señor* was right. I will go, now, and see if he has come to town. . That *palomino* is a great horse, better than those of yours. And it may be that he was not so far away as Pasco said."

"Jacks is the only man o' that crowd I'm worried about," Gabe confessed, when they had finished the *enchiladas* and fried brown beans on the table. "I do'no' any other that I wouldn't slap leather with. But Jacks was brought in as a killer. An' he has lived up to his rep'! That Leanin' D boy he killed—Tommy—he was fast an' salty! But Jacks downed him so quick Tommy woke up neck-deep in Jordan River an' likely never knew how he slipped down the bank."

Juan Ramos came back. He had found no sign of Pasco. He had seen Jacks in the Red Front Saloon. Three or four Slash-L hard cases were in town, but not in the Red Front. They were in a poker game in the Buckhorn nearly a block away. Gabe scowled at the word.

"Question is, where would Pasco go, if he come to town? Are these old-timers of the Slash-L, Juan? No? That is good! For Pasco does not know the new men. He would go to someone he knew. Jacks, I think, Rannie."

Rannie got up. He had, as usual, a .45 under his arm, as well as the one in his tied-down holster.

"Let's ramble," he drawled. "We'll not go inside anywhere. Just look around an' peep into the windows."

THEY moved up and down the street, in the fashion he had suggested. They saw Jacks at the bar in the Red Front. And Rannie thought that if he had anything on his mind, he didn't show it. He was still battered of face, but seemed in good humor. He was talking to one of the bartenders. In several rounds of the town in the next hour, they saw him once on the street, at the bar again, then upon the street. And still they ran upon no sign of Pasco.

"Looky here!" Gabe said abruptly, as they stood close against the Red Front's wall. "Pasco ain't comin' with no horn-tootin'. He'll slide in quiet an' wait somewhere for Jacks to come talk to him—send him word. An' the's been so much deviltry hatched in that back-room o' the Red Front that I wouldn't be s'prised a bit if he come the'."

So they moved down the side-wall of the saloon and went through a dark doorway. It was a wide hallway they entered, with rooms partitioned on each side of it. They were standing irresolutely at the open door of a darkened card-room when footsteps sounded in the barroom, coming that way. And from the back-door, at that moment, came the soft scuff of feet. They slid into the card-room. To them, flat against the wall inside, there came a sound as of soft whispering. Then feet sounded on the floor, heavy, deliberate, going back to the barroom.

There was little sound to tell that someone was stepping inside the card-room that sheltered them. But the door swung softly to. There was the rasp of a match. The little flame glared in their eyes for an instant, then a lamp on the wall was lit. They blinked. And the man who had lit the lamp stared at them as if paralyzed. It was Pasco.

"I wouldn't make a noise!" Gabe grinned at the *vaquero*.

"Why— Why *señores!* You have the thirst, yes? Me, I meet upon the range a boy I know. And he is to bring me, here, word of how many cattle are now being held on the Slash-L. So—"

"Bien! Bien!" Rannie beamed at him, noticing the stiff lips that grinned so awkwardly, and the shuttling of Pasco's eyes from them to the door behind them. "He will not mind if we hear?"

"I—I am much afraid so," Pasco said quickly. "He—he would fear to be known. For then the Lenoir men would kill him. It will be better if you wait for me behind the saloon. It will be but a few minutes, now, I think. Then I will come to you and tell you what this boy says. *Bien?"*

"Sit down. *Siente se!"* Rannie grunted. Then, when Pasco stumbled backward and slid into a chair against the end-wall, Rannie looked sidelong at Gabe. Very heartily, Rannie was wishing that they had not stumbled upon Pasco, so. He had wanted

to hear the *vaquero* talk with Jacks, or whatever agent of Lenoir he would see. But there was no mending that.

Gabe shrugged. He seemed to have the same thought. They leaned against the wall of the stuffy little room, between Pasco and the door, their shoulders together. And, without warning, the door was flung open. In it was framed Jacks. And that he expected to find something dangerous in the room was proved both by his snarling face and the pistol in his hand.

GABE jerked for a gun. But the marshal's pistol-muzzle twitched. Rannie snapped the Colt from the spring-holster under his arm and fired as the muzzle came clear. He fired twice and Jacks sprawled forward. Somewhere between standing and prone positions, his thumb slipped on the hammer of his cocked pistol. Pasco groaned, slumped.

"My lord!" Gabe breathed, staring down at Jacks. "I have seen chain-lightnin'. But drawin' an' killin' a man that's got the drop on yuh, before he can let drive—"

Rannie looked glaringly at Pasco. The *vaquero* had leaned backward until his chair tilted and rested against the wall. His head had fallen backward and there was a hole in his face.

"Let's hightail!" Rannie grunted. "Nobody'll know who killed 'em!"

Then he grinned. He stepped to the door, fired two shots in the general direction of the barroom, jumped back, took the pistol from Pasco's waistband and fired twice more. Then he dropped the pistol on the table before Pasco. They stepped over Jack's body and ran down the hall the half-dozen steps to the door. Out they went and ran along the backs of the buildings. They darted across the street and untied their horses. They swung up on them and went, not at a racing gallop, but at a walk, then at a gentle foxtrot, somewhat later at a lope.

Then they galloped!

"Y' know." Ronnie's tone was dreamily-pleased, "I'd set that down as a right good night's work!"

IT was near noon when Rannie pulled in Chopo on the edge of the Slash-L range, to look at the "army" he commanded. There was grim, snarling Tom Neely and his grim son, with four salty TN cowboys. Behind the TN men were the three Deuce of Heart riders with Urch Veale at their head. The 9-Bar-9 hands were mixed with Lawton Stone's four. Yoakum Ward, Gabe Annear and Tom Neely were with Rannie.

They had been riding for nearly four hours. And none but Yoakum Ward knew of the double-killing of the night before, in Cradock.

"It's just a guess," said Gabe Annear, moving his powerful shoulders in a shrug. "But if I owned the Slash-L an' had rustled stuff to hold, I'd th'ow 'em up on the Goblet Hills end o' the range. Plenty o' broken country up there, an' plenty o' grass in the arroyos an' li'l flats."

"We're this fur along," Tom Neely snarled. "Might's well git killed on Goblet Hills as anywhere else!"

"Way y' stick up," Rannie nodded gravely, "y're most shore to git killed, too. Us sawed-off rannies, we got that much on y'. Well y' already lived a long time. Reckon y' ready to cash in."

"Yeh?" Tom Neely yelled. "Yeh? I ain't fifty yet, an' I got fifty year more a-comin'! I'll outlast a hell-slew o' runts like y'! I'll outride y', out-rope y', outwrassle y', out-shoot—"

"Whoooop!" Gabe Annear grinned. "Save yo' money, Tom! Don't cover too much terr'tory, now! Yuh might have to eat some pow'ful black crow. For a old man, yuh stack up purty good, amongst old men."

He rammed the hooks to his black, grinning, as Tom Neely charged him. But Rannie noticed that Neely's snarls were rather mechanical, as Gabe spun his horse and came back. He put Neely down as a stayer, and as one whose growls were more for noise than anything else.

They jerked staples from Lenoir's fence and went into the Slash-L pasture. Faces tightened among the cowmen of the party. But the punchers grinned. There was something about crossing that line that keyed them all up. This was the border. They were over it now and it was going to be hard to turn back. If anyone there wanted to turn back—

All afternoon they rode without seeing a human and—without being seen. But that was a gamble. Lenoir might feel so

bold, with his control of county politics, that he had no guards out.

"There they are!" Gabe grunted, in mid-afternoon, with a jerk of his head toward the low hills beyond them. "Goblet Hills."

The way they went led through a broken range, gashed with arroyos; across a little wet-weather creek or two; over miles of greasewood and mesquite and buffalo grass. It was a country that seemed a million miles from civilization. Except for the stock-trails, it might have been a virgin land that never a man's foot had trod. Certainly, Rannie thought grimly, it was sufficiently a lawless land. They had their law with them, in Winchester and Colt scabbards. And two bronco-mules with camp-gear and food made them independent of any house for a week.

"WE'LL scatter now," Rannie said quietly, when they had come to the feet of the Goblets. "About a hundred an' fifty yards apart. We ought to find somethin', thataway. Straight up an' across. Gabe, any way to run the mules through the hills easy, so's we can find 'em at night?"

"I can take 'em through a nest o' arroyos," Gabe nodded.

Within ten minutes, each man was out of sight of the man on the right and left of him. Occasionally Rannie had glimpses of Yoakum Ward and Tom Neely, who were on right and left of him. Coming over a hogback as he would see them, then the three of them were lost to sight of one another going down the slopes. For an hour he rode, and another. He squinted up at the sun. It would be dark in another two hours, at the most.

Then he heard hoofbeats over to the left. Tom Neely came jogging toward him.

"Found a bunch o' steers," he grunted. "Three-four men with 'em. I seen that many. Mebbe more."

"How far?" Rannie scowled thoughtfully.

"Mile. The's a tol'able flat over the'. Kind o' like the floor to a wide pass in the hills. They're down in that. Looks like a lot o' stuff. Wish I'd had glasses."

Several hundred yards away Yoakum Ward appeared suddenly on a high place. Rannie waved to him, beckoning him. And when Ward came up, they held a council of war.

"If y' don't mind, y' two go round up the boys," said Rannie, when they had discussed the probabilities of the situation in the pass.

"What you goin' to do?" Ward grunted suspiciously.

"I'm goin' down to see what's there. Now, now! Look at it thisaway: Only ones o' that gang that knows me is Lenoir, Doc Meadows an' that one fella we never wiped out at the 'dobe walls. Not one chance in a hundred—any o' the three bein' with the stuff down in that arroyo. Doc is a fighter, not a workin' man. Lenoir's got too many irons in the fire. An' it'd be plumb plain lousy luck, for that one man that got away to have been sent. I'll go down an' hand 'em cow-chips till y' all git up. An' we'll know where we are."

He watched them go, then turned toward the end of the "pass" as Tom Neely had explained it. He rode down the slope toward its bottom, but reached the lower level before he saw any cattle. And at the moment he saw a bunch of gazing steers, he saw a tall rider come out of a gash in the wall, a Winchester across his arm. He yelled at Rannie, who lifted his right hand, open-palmed in a gesture of peace.

The two rode cautiously until they sat their horses twenty feet apart. Rannie studied the man—a scarred, swaggering rider in mid-thirties, with only one bright black-eye. A finger missing from his left hand, and he looked like a fighter.

"What yuh meanderin' around this range about?" he demanded. The Winchester was not pointing at Rannie, but it was obviously ready to cover him.

"Who's with y'?" Rannie countered.

For a long minute, the black eye roved up and down him, from battered hat to dusty boots. But longest it seemed to hang to the cannily-swung .45 on Rannie's thigh, then wandered from nose to tail of Chopo.

"Come on an' see 'em yo'self!" he grunted.

"Lenoir come up?" said Rannie casually, when they were riding, ten feet apart, even with each other.

"Have to ask the other boys that," said One-Eye.

And he only grunted when Rannie tried another question or two. They rode perhaps three hundred yards up the wide pass, going along the edges of a mixed herd of seven or eight hundred steers, cows and calves. Rannie looked furtively at the brands. Almost he shook his head.

"He's certainly shore o' hisself!" he marveled inwardly. "Ever' brand in the country! An' he ain't even bothered to blot 'em, looks like! Jist holdin' 'em. My notion is, he aims to do somethin' with 'em right sudden. Else he wouldn't hold 'em this way."

THEY came to the end of the herd, and three men got up from the ground where they hunkered or sprawled beside saddled horses. Rannie looked sharply at them, then relaxed. Not one of them was familiar. But the one man, whom he had left unhorsed at the 'dobe walls, might be among them and he would not know it. He had not seen that one. This one-eyed hard case at his stirrup—*he* might be that one.

The two rode over to the three tense, waiting men.

One-Eye grinned wolfishly.

"Li'l' stranger on our range," he told the others. "He wants to know things. 'Who's yere? An' if the Boss is come?'"

The three looked fixedly at Rannie. And around a shoulder of the wall, ten feet beyond and behind them, came Doc Meadows. His sour face was blank of expression. He looked at Rannie as if it were the most natural thing in the world, to see him there.

"Hello, Doc," said Rannie, calmly. Doc nodded.

"Hello, Rannie. Vis'tin'? Not a good climate."

"Good enough, mebbe," Rannie shrugged. "Quite some stuff y' holdin'. Course, y' got bills o' sale on it all."

The four Slash-L men stiffened. Their eyes went from Rannie to Doc Meadows. They seemed to be waiting for Doc. He fished in a pocket, got out a corn-husk cigaret and put it in his mouth. He wet the shuck, looked at it, rolled it tighter. He put its end in his mouth and pulled a match from the spotted band of his hat. When the cigaret was lit, he looked thoughtfully at Rannie.

"'T ain't polite to come vis'tin' with yo' gun on," he said. "Don't yuh want to take it off an' le me hold it?"

"Wouldn't think o' botherin' y' thataway," Rannie grinned. "Keeps me from saggin' to one side, too, it does."

"Jacks much on the draw?" Doc said quietly, as if the question meant nothing. "He was rated to be hell-on-wheels."

"Jacks? Oh! That marshal-fella! S'posed to be fast, was he? Well. . . ."

He moved his head, left hand loosening the shirt-collar. It gave him a chance to look at the crest of the arroyo-wall. If he could stall long enough to let the crowd come up, he had a chance, if a very thin chance, of getting out of here alive. Four to one was bad enough. But with Doc Meadows making a fifth, he had simply made a bad play. And if he had to pay for the mistake, he had to!

"Lenoir'll be along, right soon, now, I reckon," said Doc. "Yuh shore are a hog for warrants, Rannie. They added a couple more, for murderin' Jacks an' that Mex'. An' killing 'em when they never had a gun on, neither. Reckon they aim to hang yuh."

"Have they found about my shootin' Abraham Lincoln?" Rannie asked anxiously. "I have tried to keep that covered up, last twenty-five year an' more. I hope they never found out."

"Want to change yo' mind? It's last chance, Rannie. If yuh wasn't the gun-slingin', smoke-bustin' little devil yuh are, I wouldn't lift a finger. But I got some more business comin' up, after we set Lenny on top the world. An' we always got on, us two. But this is plumb—last—chance!"

RANNIE scowled, expression most undecided. He looked sidelong at One-Eye, then at each of the three strained-faced Slash-L rustlers.

"What's the layout, from now on?" he asked Doc, crooking leg around saddle-horn comfortably, and reaching for Durham and papers.

"We shove this stuff thirty mile, through country just like this," Doc answered calmly.

"Say!" burst forth One-Eye, leaning

toward Doc. "Yuh ain't spillin' the boss' doin's to this feller, when yuh don't know if he's goin' to take yuh up! Why—"

"Tail o' the class for yuh!" said Doc, as to a noisy child. "I'm runnin' this end o' the show. An' s' far's Rannie's concerned, I'm runnin' all the show! But, just to put what passes for yo' mind at rest, I'm goin' to tell him the straight lay. Because it won't go no further, even if he does aim to stay stubborn."

One-Eye stared hard, then grinned sinisterly. Rannie grinned, too. Either he threw in with Lenoir or he died. As Doc said, it made no difference what he knew.

"The Runnin' M will take this stuff an' blot it an' dribble it out," Doc went on. "Perfect! Trust Lenny to figger it perfect. An' we will take these one-cow ranchers, one at a time, an' wipe 'em from the face o' the map! An' there won't be enough stock left on any outfit to make it worth a dime on the big, round dollar. So Lenny'll bid 'em in, or buy the mortgages that's on all but one, an' foreclose."

"But how about the girl? The Leanin' D girl?" Rannie scowled.

"Lenny an' Quinn Redlick, the actin' sher'ff, they aim to draw straws for her," said Doc indifferently. "Lenny's right lucky, that way, too. But he aims to git her. She put a quirt across his face, oncet."

Rannie whistled his tune, almost underbreath. Still he scowled uncertainly. Then out of the spring-holster under his shirt he snapped the hide-out Colt, with a speed that took all but Doc Meadows by surprise.

But Doc had known Rannie far too long. His hand, thumb-hooked all this time in shell-belt, twisted flashingly. Had Rannie been afoot, he would have shot Doc before Doc's pistol cleared holster top, but he would have been hit once, at least.

It was Chopo who gave Rannie the edge. Chopo who kept Doc Meadows' watchfulness from saving him. For Chopo jumped the two yards between them. He was above Doc in the middle of his short, second jump. He would have swerved, to miss the man, had not Rannie twisted his head about and kept him over Doc, whose draw had been interrupted.

Rannie twisted in the saddle and fired at the lank figure of One-Eye—saltiest-seeming of the four behind him. He fired twice and hit the one-eyed man once at least. Then Chopo slipped, stumbling on Doc who was now on the ground.

IT had come so abruptly, had been executed so flashingly, that the three gaping cowboys were only now pulling their guns.

One-Eye clung to the saddle-horn with one hand; to his belly with the other. He had dropped the pistol he, alone, had not been too thunderstruck to pull. Rannie slammed his remaining shots at the trio whirling to shoot at him. Then he sent Chopo around that shoulder in the arroyo-wall, which had masked Doc Meadows from his sight in the beginning. He spun him, there, ramming the empty Colt into his waist-band, twitching the carbine from the saddle-scabbard.

From both crests of the arroyo-walls came wild yells. Rannie looked across and upward. Horsemen were coming down from the hill heights, sliding, galloping, trotting, walking. He peered around the shoulder of the arroyo-wall. The three cowboys were glaring incredulously upward, at the oncoming men. One jumped to snatch at his pony's reins. Rannie lifted the carbine and, as the man gathered up his reins, dropped him with a slug through the shoulder.

At the rifle report, the other two whirled upon him and blazed away. But he rested the carbine against the wall and shot coolly. They were shaken and fired wildly. And from the wall across the arroyo came shots that bounced from the rocks around these two. Whether he knocked them over or they were hit by fire from the heights, Rannie could not say. But in a twinkling, Doc Meadows, sitting up to put a hand to his hoof-gashed head, was the only conscious one of the five Lenoir men. Rannie scowled at him. Then he shrugged.

"Doc!" he snarled. "Come on an' take y' hawse! If y' gi' me y' word, as a good li'l' *buscadero,* that y'll git on him an' keep foggin' it o' the country; leavin' me an' Lenoir to settle this between us."

"With that Winchester lookin' at me, I got a hell of a chance to argue!" Doc said sourly. "I'll do it. Yuh're a stubborn nitwit—worse'n a mule! But if I had yo' luck—"

He came swiftly to his feet, slid around the shoulder like a cat and swung up on his horse that stood there. He seemed oblivious to the nearing riders. He looked at Rannie sulkily. Then a corner of his grim mouth climbed.

"Yuh li'l' son of a dog! I was skeered to death I was goin' to have to shoot yuh! An' then yuh slammed Chopo onto me—one thing I never looked for. Yo' damn hide-out never fooled me a bit, nor how fast yuh'd pull from it. Well, s' long, Rannie! I—Wildfire's goin' to miss Chopo!"

He sent the ugly gray forward and down the boulder-strewn arroyo like a crazy thing, swerving in and out among rocks, jumping half-buried logs and mesquite roots, his tall body swaying in the saddle. Rannie looked after him. And there was something about the exit of Doc Meadows that brought a scowl to his face. He was a conscienceless hired killer, and yet—

He waved to the men on the wall. They found paths down into the great arroyo. And Tom Neely glared up the pass in the direction Doc had gone. He jerked a thumb that way.

"Fella in a hell of a hurry an' he won't be back," Rannie said curtly. 'I reckon we might's well work this bunch an' see what's in it. I counted a half-dozen brands, includin' all o' y's an' the Leaning D. Me, I'm goin' to scout back the way we come. These fellas thought Lenoir'd be along soon. If he's comin', we want to know it. They aimed to send all this stuff to the Runnin' M. That's the big holdin' ground, seems like."

"Runnin' M!" Urch Veale snarled. "Zanic Fuller playin' in with Lenoir, huh? Well, we'll put a crimp in Zanic—that always acts so pious!"

RANNIE rode past the cattle again. He was out of the foothills before dusk and he turned mechanically toward the juncture of the Slash-L and Leaning D ranges. Dark came, and he had neither seen nor heard anything of Lenoir or his men.

"Lenoir an' Quinn Redlick 'll draw straws, huh? An' she put a quirt across Lenoir's face, did she?"

And suddenly, he could not stand the thoughts that came to him. There she was on the Leaning D, with nobody to guard the door but the Negro cook. And what was to keep Lenoir and his hands from riding there tonight? Why should he wait, he and this crooked sheriff?

Rannie began to lope, then to gallop. The moon came up, an enormous yellow disk above the greasewood and mesquite. With breathing-spells, Rannie sent Chopo for the line-fence. They crossed it, and he muttered to Chopo:

"Good hawse! When y' was made they busted the mold right out in meetin'. Don't y' fall down on me tonight, y' useless dun billygoat, or I'll sell y' to a peddler-wagon!"

And Chopo, as if he had not been ridden all day, covered the ground between, unrolling the miles like ribbon from a spool. When at last he could expect to see the house, Rannie pulled in short to stare anxiously. And suddenly the house fairly jumped from the darkness ahead of him, with the lighting of what seemed every window.

He went on, puzzled, scowling. What would all that mean? He came closer, at a cautious foxtrot, making little sound. In the shelter of the corral, he sat looking. And from the house came a wild cowboy yell. It was the signal for a chorus. Then a very bellow of laughter. A door slammed. There was a crash and more laughing. Wild whoops seemed to encourage someone.

A window—one of the few on the back wall from which no light came—came outward with a jangling smash of glass. A man hit the ground and hit it running. Another man followed. The first man raced across the back yard, passing through the light from a window on the other side. Rannie stared. That height, with that wide, white Knox hat— It was Cephas Kinne. Rannie knew it, though he had seen Kinne but the one time, in the Red Front Saloon.

And the man following was shooting at him! A short man, who ran like a rabbit. Rannie touched Chopo with the rowel and trotted after them. The short man in the checked shirt had stopped. Kinne seemed to be hiding somewhere in the greasewood and mesquite. The armed man was snarling at him.

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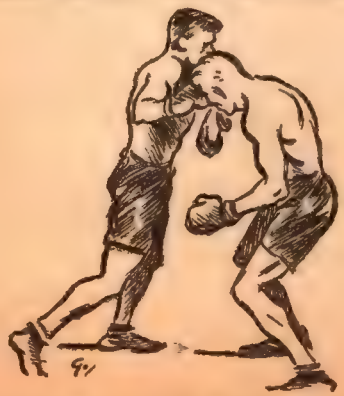

blowed off! Might as well git it over with. Ahhh! You would, huh?"

He fired at a bush. There was a great rustling, ten feet to one side of the bush. Again the short man fired, this time at the sound of the rustling. And Cephas Kinne jumped up and, all doubled over, ran on. The short man flipped the cylinder of his pistol sidewise, ejected empty shells deftly and reloaded. He took a long shot at Kinne, who promptly ducked behind another bush.

THE killer whirled at the sound of Chopo's hoofs. He glared for a moment, his face plain in the moonlight. He was one of those Slash-L men who had been in Cradock the night before, when Gabe and Rannie went in for Pasco. A half-dozen times Rannie had seen him with the others, in the poker game at the Buckhorn.

"Put that pistol down," Rannie admonished him. "What the hell's goin' on around here, anyhow?"

"Yeh?" cried the killer. The long double-action lifted. Rannie spurred Chopo aside, and the gun in his hand jumped up. The Slash-L man fired twice. Rannie fired three times. Rannie had a snag in his shirt, under his left arm, when the shooting was over.

But the man in the checked shirt lay prone, motionless.

Rannie rode past him and over toward the spot where Kinne had disappeared. Kinnie popped up and began to run. Rannie yelled at him, giving his name. There was no sign from the house that anyone gave heed to this affair outside. Kinne stopped, hand at side, panting.

"What's it all about?" Rannie snapped.

"Lenoir an' Quinn Redlick an' a couple Slash-L men," Kinne gasped. "Lord! I thought I was gone! They broke in, a little while back. Claire screamed. I didn't have a gun. Never carry one. I jumped for a back bedroom. They started after me. Lenoir grabbed Claire when she run. I—I don't know much what happened then. I jumped out o' the window with that fella after me, shootin'. Did you—"

"Yeh, I finished him. Now we'll go get his belt an' pistol, an' me an' y', Kinne, we'll go in an' smoke 'em up!"

"What? Us two, against that bunch? It's crazy! We'd just be killed. I—I tell you what: We'll go after some more men an'—Why, we couldn't face four of 'em, Losson!"

"We'll have the edge," Rannie explained patiently. "We bust in an' open up without sayin' a word. They're in there, Kinne, drawin' straws for who takes Claire. Now, folks do say that she an' y'—"

"That's a dirty lie! I've known her for years. I've ask' her to marry me a thousand times—an' she won't. Wouldn't. An' I tried to help her with her pa. I'd help her now, but I don't handle a gun. I—I wouldn't be a bit o' good!"

"I RECKON y're right," Rannie nodded finally. "Tell y' what: Git y' hawse an' ride for the Goblet Hills on the Slash-L range. There's Tom Neely an' Yoakum Ward an' Lawton Stone an' Urch Veale an' all their hands, up the' with a herd we took today from some Lenoir fellas—rustled stuff. They're in a big arroyo like a pass through the hills. Y' reckon y' can find it?"

"I know where it is," Kinne nodded eagerly. "I'll go bring 'em! I'll kill a hoss, but I'll bring 'em. You goin' to wait till we come, huh?"

Rannie shook his head.

"No, I'm goin' in. But if I flop, y' all can handle what I leave."

He turned Chopo back toward the corral. He saw no sign of life at the windows. But the noise inside was terrific. Yells that sounded drunken; furniture being overturned.

He swung down in the shelter of the corral and dropped his reins. He watched the back of the house for an instant, then crossed the space between in a rush, a gun in each hand. He stopped at the closed back-door, then cautiously turned the knob and slid inside.

Something came cracking across his head, and the next thing that he heard was a thick, but sympathetic voice, close at hand:

"Shore! Give th' poor illegitimate a drink. We got a plenty. An' anybody'd give a man goin' to be hung a drink."

There was a lot of laughing, then. A

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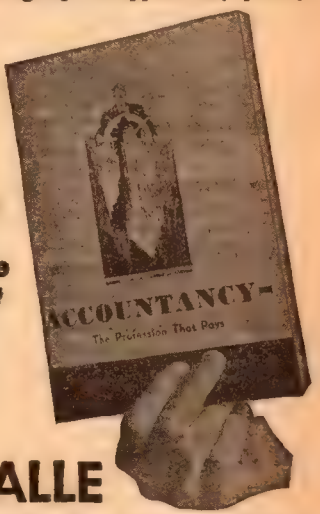

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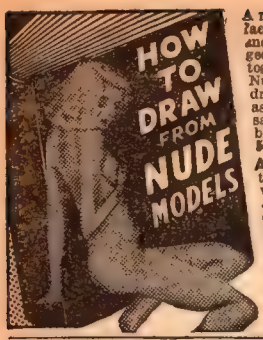

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bottle-neck was rammed between his lips, and whiskey filled his mouth, running out and down chin and neck.

"Don't be so—dam' butterfingered!" Rannie snarled at his benefactor. Another roar of laughter.

Rannie sat up on the floor and blinked sulkily in the light. A grinning, evidently drunk, cowboy stood over him with a quart bottle in his hand, rocking on his heels. There was Lenoir, standing with his hands on the butts of his pistols, grinning, too. And his bloodshot eyes and flushed face told of the liquor in him.

Straddling a chair, with his chin on its back, was a huge red-faced youngster. He had a tin cup in his hand. He waved it as he talked, and whiskey splashed out of it. There was a gold badge on his shirt-front. Evidently, Quinn Redlick, Lenoir's acting sheriff. He, too, was grinning.

"The boy won-dah!" Lenoir grinned. "Yes, sir! M' ol' friend Doc Meadows' boy wonder. Eats 'em alive-o! Chain lightnin' on the draw an' he never misses! Charge hell with a tin cup full o' water. An' he ain't got sense enough not to run up on a house where I can see him. Well, ain't the first one that stubbed his toe, buckin' Lenny Lenoir. Jim Donelson tried it. Sam Tormey tried it a month before Donelson. Buzzard-bait, both of 'em! An' now, you!"

Lenoir chuckled.

Rannie paid no attention to him. He was looking for Claire. He found her in a corner, crouching on the floor, the dress almost torn from her shoulders. A cowboy squatted beside her, holding her wrist with one hand, a bottle in the other. Rannie stared into her widened eyes, and after a moment, she closed hers and seemed to sag hopelessly.

"WELL!" Rannie shrugged, getting weakly to his feet. "I reckon ever'body stubs his toe, some time, Lenoir. Y' time'll come, an' then y' won't be grinnin' like I'm grinnin'! For y' ain't got the stuff in y' back that'll *let* y' grin!"

He reached out a hand toward the quart in the cowboy's fingers. It was pure desperation, what he was going to do. But a man had to go out, some time,

somehow! And this was his time. But if he could take Lenoir and Redlick with him—well! It was all hanging on his luck.

"Gi' me another drink!" he snapped at the cowboy, then stepped forward and twitched the bottle from the fellow's hand. He took it in his left hand, grinning sardonically at Lenoir, who was leaning a little forward, his Colts lifting slightly in the holsters, glaring at him.

"Why—why, you—" Lenoir began.

Rannie's left hand, gripping the quart bottle, jerked. He smashed the cowboy in the face and jerked the .45 from the fellow's waistband. He stepped behind him and shot at Lenoir.

Redlick's chair fell over with him as he tried to get to his feet and pull a gun.

Then, the room was full of the crash of shots; full of stinging, acrid powder-smoke.

Rannie went to the floor as if knocked down with an axe, with the impact of a bullet in his chest, high up. He twisted and slammed his last shot at the wall-lamp. It vanished with a jingle of glass. There was no light except what came through doors from other lighted rooms. And the stabbing flames of shots criss-crossed the blackness of the center of the room.

Rannie got to his knees and was hit again. He fell on his face. Who was shooting, he had no idea. Lenoir had been on his feet—though hit—when the light went out. Redlick had been on the floor, tugging at his gun.

Rannie crawled forward. The lead sang both ways across the room, over his head. He butted his face into a chair and someone grunted beyond it. He reached out with his right hand—the left was numb and useless now, twice hit—and touched a shirted body. The man recoiled with an oath. Rannie dropped flat again. A gun flamed, almost in his face. He somehow hurled himself forward.

He landed on top of a man. His down-slapping hand fell upon a pistol and bore it down to the floor. It exploded, the flame scorching his fingers badly.

He snatched and got it by the barrel, jerked it from the fingers that held it. He drove a knee upward and felt it land

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on flesh. An agonized groan was drawn from the man struck. He turned the gun in his hand and rammed it against the man's body.

From above a gun flamed, again and again. Distinctly, as an undertone to the noise of the room, Rannie heard the soft thudding of lead into flesh. The man under him relaxed with a sighing noise. Rannie lifted the pistol-muzzle and fired toward the spot from which those shots had come. Another gun opened up from the opposite side of the room. Rannie twisted and with his final shot in that direction, heard the drop of a pistol to the floor. Then came the crash of a body coming down and knocking a chair over.

Then there was silence. Rannie felt amazingly weak. He lay on the floor, his whole body one dull ache that matched the throbbing of his bruised head. His gun was empty. And he had no idea who was alive, of the four men who had been in the room when this slaughter began.

TEN feet away, there was a dragging sound. Something fairly heavy—so it seemed—was being pulled across the floor. It moved past Rannie. To the door—he thought—of a lighted room. After three attempts, he rolled over and managed to turn his pain-racked body to face that way. And through the door came Lenoir, carrying a lamp.

But it was a Lenoir sagging-shouldered, reeling. He swayed in the doorway until he got a shoulder against the jamb. He looked with head turning slowly from left to right, with something leonine, ferocious, in his slow head-swinging. Lurching, he came into the room and set the lamp on a table that miraculously was not overturned. He put his hand down on the table and looked at the bodies on the floor.

"Ahhh!" he said, meeting Rannie's eyes.

Painfully, he bent his knees, clinging to the table. He was squatting, groping for a pistol that someone had dropped. He tried to stand again, but gave up the attempt. On hands and knees he came crawling toward Rannie. He left a crimson trail behind him; and where one open hand and the knuckles of the hand hold-

ing the pistol, touched the pine floor, there were scarlet patches.

Rannie turned his head. Claire was gone from her corner. Across it, now, lay the cowboy who had held her. The quart bottle he had also held lay on the floor by his face, the neck at his stiff-lipped mouth. It looked as if he were lying prone, drinking. Rannie's mouth twitched slightly. Funny! Dam' funny!

But the rasp-rasp-rasp of something metal on Lenoir's clothing, dragging the pine planks, told him that the would-be king of the Cradock country was coming nearer. He was a salty hairpin, Rannie conceded—as if it all meant nothing to him. He might be cashing in, that Lenoir. But he was going to kill a man before he cashed.

Rannie was strangely indifferent to the fact that *he* was the man Lenoir would kill. He was so weak, so tired, that it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Lenoir and he would cross the Big Line together—or almost together. Then a thought came—what if Lenoir got well? What if he weren't so badly hurt, right now? What if he managed, single-handed, to do what he had come to do—take Claire Donelson and pay her out with brutality for daring to quirt him?

It was very much like a long drink, and that reminded Rannie of the bottle that had been beside Quinn Redlick's chair. He turned his head and found it, overturned.

Lenoir was no more than four feet away, now. But with this new-found energy, Rannie could crawl himself. He made the bottle, picked it up clumsily. There was still liquor in it, if but a little.

With eyes upon Lenoir, he tilted it and emptied it. Then he moved again. This time, he crawled toward Lenoir. Lenoir's white face stiffened in an expression of unbelief. He stopped. He rolled his body a little, to get the pistol-hand off the floor. Rannie crawled on.

The pistol roared. Rannie was powder-scorched, but no numbing shock came, to proclaim a hit. He crawled on. Again the pistol roared. Rannie's eyes were dazzled. He saw Lenoir only as a vague shape before him. Then he touched him.

He reared up on his knees and fell on

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Lenoir. He felt the jerk of Lenoir's gun-hand. He flailed out blindly, and his hand closed on Lenoir's wrist. Then his strength gave way and he swayed flat on Lenoir, taking the pistol with him.

There was a muffled explosion. Flame seared Rannie's side. But nothing more. The light had strangely gone out. . . .

SOMEONE tugged at him, shook him. Someone was pouring whiskey down his throat. He shook his head impatiently. He swallowed the liquor that threatened to choke him. Hands were tugging at his clothing. Above the dull ache of his whole body, there rose sharp stabbing pains in his left shoulder and in his left arm.

"Bet he don't!" a far away voice said. "Two holes an' lots o' blood, shore! But this kind—hell! Couldn't kill 'em with a broad-axe! He'll be up an' ridin' off to raise hell some'r's else."

Rannie opened his eyes. He was in a bedroom—the same bedroom into which he and Snowball, years and years before, it seemed, had carried the body of Jim Donelson. He saw the rain-spot on the wall beyond him. Faces . . . faces . . . faces . . . Looked to be a hundred beside him.

Then he made out Gabe Annear grinning. And Yoakum Ward. Tom Neely. Cephas Kinne. Then a movement, and the men gave back. Claire Donelson came forward with a water-pitcher and a tumbler.

"You — You — Why — he's conscious!" she cried. She smiled twistedly down at him. He tried to nod, eyes on her.

"Boy!" cried Yoakum Ward. "You shore wiped 'em out! O' course, there's plenty odds an' ends to clean up. We got a call to make up at Zanic Fuller's Runnin' M, an' that we'll pay tomorrow."

"How'd y' happen to git here so quick?" Rannie breathed. "Or was it quick?"

"Cephas Kinne come bustin' down the timber, while some o' us was foggin' in yo' tracks. We was skeered you might run into Lenoir. So we headed this way. Cephas met us an'— Well—" he looked sidelong at Kinne, then at Claire.

"We got no sher'f's office," Tom Neely snarled. "An' this bunch, yere, we aim

to have a say about who goes in for sher'f now. An' with Lenoir wiped out an' the rest o' his crew due to decorate the cotton-woods when we lays hands on 'em—same's Zanic Fuller's gang—I reckon we will run this country an' run her right!"

"And right now," Claire told them, looking about. "I think you'd better troop outside! Snowball will feed you and show you where to bunk."

Cephas Kinne was the only one who lingered. He stood beside the bed and looked somberly down at Rannie, then up, almost furtively, at Claire.

"I—I—" he began. Claire motioned him away.

But he stuck to his ground, stubbornly.

"I can't go without tellin' you, Claire, that I thought a lot on the way back here. I see now that I'd ought to've stuck an' fought that crew with my bare hands, till they killed me."

"Don't be silly!" she snapped at him. "You're no fighter, Cephas. You know that, and I know it, now. You could no more have stood up to be killed than another man could have run! Now, go on out!"

Cephas went slowly, head down, to join the chattering bunch somewhere beyond. Rannie looked at the girl.

"Y' was hard on him," he said huskily.

She said nothing at all until she pulled a chair up beside the bed. She felt his wrist in practiced fashion, looking at the tin alarm clock on its shelf over the bed.

"Subnormal. But before you're out of the woods, it probably won't be. I'll have old Aunt Sarah come to help me.

"Oh! Was I hard on Cephas? Well, perhaps. I was comparing him with—well, other men I've seen. I've always known that he was a rather poor stick. But now— Didn't you start to tell me, one day, when you stayed in Cradock? Why you took up the dead man's hand and played it?"

Rannie stared narrowly at her. Pain was gone for the instant. Slowly he grinned. He put out a heavy hand to her sleeve.

"Y' got the most kissable mouth—or is it—just kiss-at-able? I got to find out—I been wonderin'—"

"Then—don't wonder!" she whispered.

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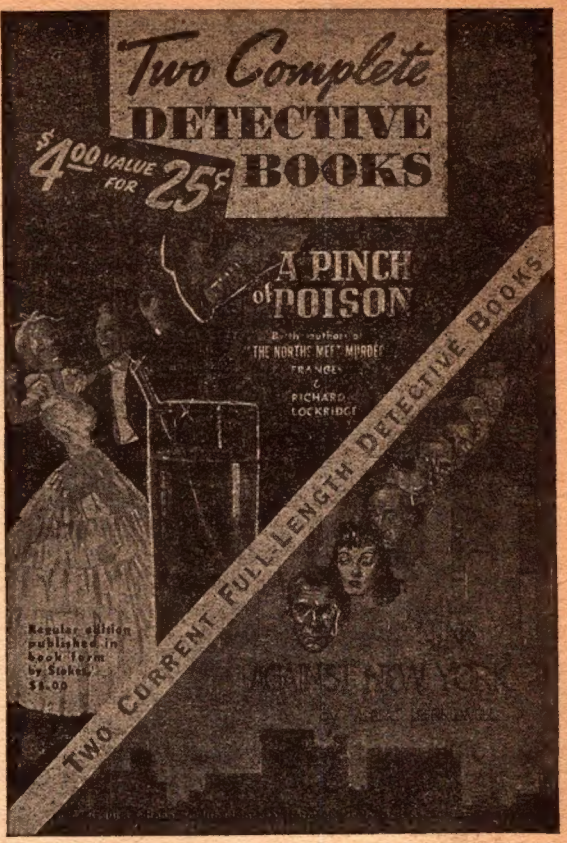

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